

THE MEMOIRS OF A MAHARAJA'S MISTRESS

The Memoirs of
A Maharaja's Mistress

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CHAPTER I

The Object

In this year of 1943 A. D. I am 43 years of age. My name is Ganga, Since that terrible *Vasant Purnchmi Day* of 1937, I have renounced the world, turned a recluse and I am now passing my days in austerity and penance to atone for my sins, at the holy temple of Lord Shree Vishnu, situated on the outskirts of the city of Suvarnapur. I am sincerely repenting of my past misbehaviour and daily praying before this sacred *Deity* to forgive me.

When I look back into my past, I have nothing but my reckless sins to remember and to expiate for them in heart-felt repentance. I sometimes accurse my own mother Gomti for leading me on to a path of immorality involving unchaste derelictions but at other times, I do not find fault with her. The fault lies, I think, in my own inherent weakness for lust and lucre, which had established its strong hold

upon me at a testing time of my life when I was enjoying robust health and blooming youth. It's no use accursing my mother, born and bred up as 'she was in an atmosphere where gaining and maintaining of royal favours by surrender of body alone gave one decent means of livelihood. She initiated me into the course and once involved in the dazzle of regal grandeur and luxurious splendour of it, I could not but run headlong into it. I was then too young to discriminate between right and wrong, virtue and vice or a woman's chastity and unchastity. Once on the road deviating from virtue, I, too, like my mother discovered that ingratiating a woman's self into and thereby gaining of royal goodwill was a great asset and a smooth source of making easy money. Easy virtues in a royal palace bring easy money. Costly gifts are innumerable, provided one has the duplicity and the trick of the trade. Thus, once I lapsed from virtue, I went on lapsing, till my robust youth was consumed in the fire of lust and license. I think my innate propensities to enjoy unbounded pleasures of the flesh was as much responsible for my moral wreckage as the contaminating regal atmosphere I lived in.

But my headlong career was not a serial of smooth and straight pastimes of pleasure and enjoyment. It underwent in its course tragic pitfalls and staggering perplexities, eventually affecting the lives of four young persons.

It is said that sins of parents are visited upon their children. These four young children were godly innocent and gloriously virtuous, and how the sins of their guilty father were visited upon them, the reader will learn from these my memoirs. I must regretfully confess that I was no less guilty. My sins in collaboration in no less degree contributed to the shattering of pure love sentiments of these four young children beyond hope of redemption.

I am recording in these my memoirs incidents and experiences of my wretched life. Some of them may look abhorrent and even grotesque or filthy at first sight; but all the same I narrate them in their actual occurrence and correct sequence, if they can serve as an object-lesson to my fellow-women serving in royal palaces. They can now see behind the royal screens and may God save them from getting enamoured of ostentatious glamour and artificial dazzle emanating from awe and grandeur of royal personages responsible to none.

For obvious reasons, the names and official designations of royal characters I came in contact with, have been fictitiously given in this narration of my story.

Suvarnapur
1-3-1943

Ganga Vadaran

CHAPTER II

Why I was called "Dholi"

I was born in the year 1900 A. D. Perhaps the two zeros in the number of the year I was born in, indicate the sum-total of my life—a moral blank. I belonged to a low caste of Rajputs, which is known in my province as '*Khawas*'. I was born and bred up in the servants-quarters of the Darbargadh of Chandipur, a small native principality enjoying a revenue income of about two lacs of rupees a year. ; My father Shambhu was an attendant (huzuria) of the Raja Saheb of Chandipur and my mother Gomti was chief attendant (moti vadaran) to the Ranee Saheb, wife of Raja Saheb.

I do not remember the days of my infancy and therefore my reminiscences begin from the age of 7 when, I remember, the people of the Darbargadh (residential quarters of a Raja including servants' houses, garages, stables etc) used to call and address me as Dholi (literally, white-Skinned). The people

in a darbargadh are those male and female servants who reside within the compound of the palace and constitute aide-de-camps, body-guards, huzur secretaries, private secretaries, personal assistants, attendants, pages, valets, chamber-maids, hamals, barbers, chauffeurs, drivers, cleaners, syces, drum-beaters, pipe-players, time bell-ringers etc forming the personal staff of the royal personages residing in the darbargadh. I then didn't know why these people were calling me by name of Dholi, but subsequently I came to learn that I was called by that specific name because my skin was white.

My parents were fairly in a decent condition of life. In the year 1905, my mother had given birth to another daughter, Jamna. She, too, was as white-skinned as I was. At the age of 9, when my understanding began to mature, I found that the women-folk of the darbargadh were envious of my mother. Some men remarked to me that she was the boss of the darbar-gadh. Then a girl older than myself one day told me that I was dholi, because Gomtibai was in good graces of Raja Saheb. I began to reflect over this sarcasm. I observed that my father Shambhu had a dark-skinned and repulsive complexion and my mother Gomti had not a white but wheat-skinned though symmetrical complexion. I then set myself before a mirror and discovered in mental comparison and contrast that my face was very

white and more oval than the roundish face of my mother. Misgiving began to raise itself in my mind. "Why they call me dholi, although my real name is Ganga!" I once ventured to ask my mother.

"That's because you have a charming face and a perfectly white body" Proudly replied my mother

"How is it that I am so white, when my father is so dark and you too, mother, are not at least so white?" I impulsively asked her.

She calmly replied "you are a gift from Raja Saheb and that's due to his favours, you are still too young to understand it. '

But at last I began to understand it. All of a sudden, it came to me that Rajasaheb's face was very white. Raneesaheb had a daughter named Kamalakumari, by about two years older than myself and she had the same whiteness of skin as I had, though it looked more polished and glossy because of its refined and luxurious toilette. I began to peep stealthily into the private behaviour of my mother with Rajasaheb and as a result of constant and studied watch, a conviction developed within me that Kamalaba, Ganga and Jamna were the off-spring of the same father through different mothers. At the age of 12, I inwardly hated my mother for her perfidy to my father Shambhu

but I dared not speak anything about it to her or to my father. Such was her powerful awe over the darbar-gadh people that every body got dumb in her snobbish presence. Whether my father connived at her misbehaviour with Rajasaheb or wilfully ignored it or didn't at all know of it, I could never know. But then I made up my mind in the first flush of innocence that I should never be like her and that if I got married, I should never be perfidious to my husband. I don't know what led me to decide this. Perhaps it was the inner voice of a Hindu girl dictated by scruples of conscience. Orherwise why should I have then hated my moth er in my heart? No external agency had spoken to me anything against her. Nobody had taught me to hate her and all the same hatred came to me naturally and spontaneously. This was the state of my mind with respect to my mother at my age of 12, a guileless and innocent age.

Since my childhood, I was a constant companion of Kamalaba. We played together and she treated me as her own friend in a sister-like fashion. I laboured for her and always minutely ministered to her small needs, conveniences and comforts and saw to it that She was being kept in a cheerful mood and nice humour Thus she grew so fond of me that she rarely parted with me and always insisted upon my going to school with her. Rajasaheb had also engaged a native christian lady as

private tutor and it was from this lady that I acquired some inkling of the knowledge of English language which I subsequently developed by reading stories novels and other light literature of that language.

Thus my life at Chandipur ran its even course, mostly spent in devoted service and regular attendance on Kamala Kumariba Saheb, the Rajkumari of Chandipur.

CHAPTER III

Royal Marriage

While we were still attending the English High school at Chandipur, one morning I found that there were great rejoicings in the darbargadh. I heard Raja-saheb's small band of pipers playing and drummers beating at the gate. Townsman were coming in and going out. I heard that Kamalaba was that day going to be engaged (betrothed) to a very big Raja and that the marriage was likely to be celebrated within a fortnight. It was the marriage-season of the year 1915. I ran up to my mother and inquired of her what it was all about.

‘ Don’t you see, you she-ass, that Kamala Kumariba saheb is being betrothed to a big Raj? Oh! she is very very lucky. ’

‘ But with whom? ’ I queried.

‘ With Maharaja Saheb of Suvarnapur. May God grant him a long life. ’

‘ But what’s his name ? What’s his age ? ’

‘ Vilas Sinhji Saheb Bahadur. They say he is 22 and recently enthroned on the gadi of the Raj of Suvarnapur. They say it is a very big Raj of forty lacs of rupees a year. Kamalaba is very lucky that Maharajasahab liked her photo and approved of it. That’s why he is going to marry her. He himself is coming here to marry. It’s not going to be a sword marriage. ’

Upon hearing this pleasant intelligence from my mother, I joyfully ran up to the place and heartily congratulated Kamalaba on her great good fortune she smiled and said :

‘ Well, Ganga ! You’ll have to accompany me. I am going to take you with me, wherever I go. That’s why I am going to request Bapu (Rajasahab) to send your mother Gontibai as my chambermaid. ’

‘ I must obey your command, now that you are going to be Maharanee saheb of a big big raj ’ I jocularly replied.

The marriage-day approached. My parents were ordered at the instance of Kamalaba to get ready for accompanying her to her husband’s capital, Suvarnapur. It’s a custom amongst princedom that when a princess marries and goes to her royal husband’s abode, she

takes her own staff from her father's place. My mother was to be her chambermaid and my father her kamdar at Suvarnāpur.

There were flags and festoons, banners and bunting, all over the darbargadh and the town of Chadi-pur. On the night of the marriage, the palace was illuminated with multi-coloured electric lights. The whole compound of the darbargadh was teeming with the men and womenfolk of the town. The marriage party had arrived from suvarnapur with about 400 men. A huge procession with bands playing and drums beating entered in din and bustle the gorgeously decorated welcome gate, followed by the bridegroom seated on a gold-framed chair installed inside a silver-plated howdah mounted on the back of a huge highly embellished and richly canopied she-elephant.

There from a balcony of the palace infested with women and children I saw Vilas Sinhji Saheb Maharaja of Suwarnpur, whose fate was destined to be interwoven with that of mine. He was handsome, robust and in the full prime of his manhood. His features though slightly wheatish in colour were yet attractively symmetrical. His lotus-like eyes were gorgeously lustrous and painfully piercing, as it were, into the heart of a maiden. I at once decided that he was a perfect match for our dear beautiful princess Kamalaba.

That midnight, I don't know why but some how or other, I felt a little pang of jealousy in my heart for Kamalaba, when, after the nuptial ceremony was over, I saw her proceeding to the bridal chamber, which I had taken so much pains to decorate florally, according to her wishes, for the reception of her newly-wedded husband. I was then 15 years of age and had begun to develop into womanhood. I had gathered from my watch of my mother's behaviour, a full idea of the ways of sex in a bridal chamber.

The marriage festivities lasted for three days. On the morning of the fourth day my parents, Jumna and myself started to go to Suvarnapur along with the returning marriage-party. A special train was engaged for the purpose. We were seated in a servants-compartment adjoining the bride's saloon. We reached Suvarnapur the same evening. Again a huge procession started from the station to the Suvarna palace. Later on that night, we found ourselves lodged in the servant's quarters of that palace, the residence of the Maharaja of Suvarnapur.

CHAPTER IV

An Audacious Mother

We stayed peacefully and quietly in our new surroundings, passing our leisure time in sight-seeing and witnessing the capital of Suvarnapur State, which we had never seen or heard of before. My mother was regularly attending to her duties as Chambermaid to Kamalaba, now Maharanee saheb of Suvarnapur. She was at first rather strict with me as regards my movements. One day she said to me "Ganga ! Now you are a grown-up girl. You should not move about freely amongst the people here. You are not meant for ordinary folk. Chandipur, your birth-place was a different thing. There you were a child. Here no longer you are a child. You should not mix with palace people here, especially young men."

I passed about ten months in a secluded way, confining myself to the kitchen and domestic drudgery for my parents. About the end of 1915, there were rejoicings in the palace. Some palace people had come

from Chaudipur. It was the occasion of the Simant (first pregnancy) ceremony of Kamalaba. The previous day, she had asked my mother to bring me to the palace to attend on her at the auspicious occasion and so I went in the morning with my mother. Huzursaheb was away on his morning ride. Kamalaba was in her sitting-room and there she got me engaged to do some embroidery work for her. Four big apartments had been allotted to her in the upper storey of the palace viz., a drawing-room (used as her sitting room), dining room, bed room and worship room. After a while Huzur returned from his ride and approached the sitting-room. He saw us and stopped short on the threshold. My mother and I at once stood up and made him a low bow.

‘ Who is this young lady ? ’ He asked my mother.

‘ She is my daughter. ’

‘ Your daughter ! I’m surprised. She looks like a young lady. How is’t that I see her just ? ’

‘ She is very shy. ’ My mother confusedly replied. For a while he stared and then smiling at me left us without entering the room. That whole day, I saw that Huzur was pacing about here and there in the lobbies, very often gazing at me and trying to catch my eyes. I too surreptitiously

glanced at him to see whether he was looking at me and when my eyes met his, I averted mine from him. It seemed as if his eyes wanted to talk something, every moment they met mine. Thus Huzur passed the whole day in looking at me and I in glancing at him and then looking down with averted eyes. I felt that he was through his eyes gloating over my face and form. This state of things lasted until the ceremonies took place in the evening. The whole palace was crowded with invited families of state officers and the ladies and children of the city. I was assisting at the hair-dressing and toileting of Kamalaba. Soon after the ceremonies were over and the people had dispersed, Nathu, the head-attendant of Huzur approached my mother and told her that she was wanted by Huzur to his royal presence immediately. My mother so went away, accompanied by Nathu. I waited for her return until night-fall, but not seeing her anywhere in the palace, I took leave of Kamalaba and returned to my quarters.

Until midnighgt, I was lying awake and my mother had not yet returned. My father was away at Chandipur on some business entrusted to him by Kamalaba. My sister Jamna had already gone to bed and was soundly snoring in her sleep. I was all alone in my house and got restless and worried, because my mother never went out at night. I was thinking of advising the

police at the gate, when I heard a blowing sound of the horn of a motor-car.

In those days a car was a rarity in my province, being regarded as a very great luxury which only the richest could afford. I had subsequently learnt from Sidik the Chauffeur that Huzur had one car only, though he had forty carriages and pairs, and that the car had been imported direct from England at a cost of thirty-five thousand rupees and that it was a Rolls-Royce.

On hearing the sound of the horn, I, through curiosity, looked through the bars of a window which was facing on the main road. Our quarters were abutting the road, having entrance-doors both from the roadside and from within the compound of the people. I saw that the car had just stopped on the farthest end of the road but just opposite to the window where I was standing. To my unbounded wonder, I found my mother seated side by side with Huzur on the back seat of the long car. They were muttering something to each other as if in a whisper. It seemed as if they were deeply engaged in a highly important politically confidential conversation. I positively saw that Huzur had his arm stretched behind the neck of my mother, who was leaning on it. After a little while, she stole a kiss on the cheek of

Huzur and swiftly alighted from the car. The car started and swirled into the palace gate.

I didn't want to let my mother know that I had seen her seated with Huzur in his car. I didn't want to make her feel ashamed or awkward in her daughter's eyes, though, I think, she would have cared a twopence had I informed her that I had caught her red-handed at such a convenient time as past midnight. So I pretended to be asleep, lay down on my bed and covered myself with a sheet.

My mother entered the room and woke me up by shouting 'Get up, you sluggard! Where is the key of my trunk?'

I pointed out the peg on which a bunch of keys was hanging.

'Just look at this, Ganga! I want to lock it up in my trunk.' She laid bare her neck and displayed a heavily jewelled gold necklace.

'Where did you get this from? I suppose you got the inam (gift) from Kamalaba in token of to-day's celebrations.' I feignedly asked her.

'No! No. That's not it. Hazur was very good to me to-night. He took me round in his big car to Vilasbag. Oh! what a furnished bungalow and what a lovely garden! If there is heaven on earth, it is there.'

Oh ! how beautifully I enjoyed ! What a nice time ! And, and he presented to me this costly necklace. Now Ganga ! don't you be jealous ? You are a grown-up girl now, almost a fit woman to enjoy the pleasure. Nice things to eat, nice beds to sleep and nice gifts to recieve. I needn't tell you that I was looking for the opportunity and it's come. You have got the best chance of your life to make good money here, if you catch the opportunity. I had no such big chance at Chandipur, though Raja saheb was all good to me and treated me most favourably with his small gifts. Now look here, Ganga ! You are a wise and clever girl. You would know how to make most of this business with Maharaja saheb. I have to-day come to know that he maddens at the sight of beauty. He saw you in Kamalaba's room this morning and since then he has been panting for you. He told me frankly so and commanded me to send you up to his beautiful bungalow Vilasbag, where I had been to-day. You have got to go there tomorrow night. He has promised me to make you a gift of Rs. 500 and I have agreed to it on your behalf. Can I afford to displease him by negativing his invitation ? He asked me, too, whether you were a married girl and he was mightily overjoyed when I said 'No'. Now Ganga ! what a splendid chance I have got for you to kill two birds with one stone ! you should not miss it, if you were a wise and practi-

cal girl of the world. It hardly comes once in a lifetime. What do you think of it ?

The whole enthusiastic eloquence of my mother first came as a bolt from the blue to me. I was staggered at the boldness of her suggestions and nakedness of her overtures, and the more so because they were emanating from the lips of a mother. For a time I was astounded into speechlessness.

‘What are you thinking ? Ganga !’ She continued her oration. What’s the hitch ? What’s there to think ? Of course, it’s for you to decide whether to take the chance or drop it. To my mind, such a beautiful girl as you are is only meant by God to associate with rajas. You can’t afford to waste your marvellous beauty on inferior sort of people from whom you can make nothing. Alright. Let the question of money-making go to hell. But yet the big question remains. Can we afford to disobey the commands of Hazur ? He has ordered me to send you up on a visit to Vilasbag. How can I disobey that order ? Don’t you see that although I am 20 years older than he is yet I had to abide by his wishes and cater to his pleasures tonight ?’

‘Let me think it over,’ I quietly replied. ‘You know how to behave with rajas. You are trained in that art. I am not yet. I feel all nervous about it, just at present. I will tell you in the morning what I am going to do. Let me think it over.’

CHAPTER V

"I am but your slave ready to obey your commands"

I lay on my bed, all nerves. My inward hatred for my mother was now so intensified that I had half a mind to kill her there and then. My virginity began to revolt at the idea of being sold at money price. My conscience refused point-blank to allow me to seek illicit love or to surrender my body to a forbidden man. My ideal was like that of any ordinary Hindu girl viz. to surrender body only to the man in lawful wedlock. And here was a proposal that completely shattered the ideal so dearly cherished by all Hindu women. But alas ! these sacred thoughts lasted for a time only at the beginning of my reflections over my mother's guilty persuasion. Then all of a sudden, I remembered the marriage-day at Chandipur when I had been so very deeply impressed with the strikingly handsome appearance of the bridegroom. I remembered that short pang of jealousy I had felt for the bride on her entering the bridal chamber. I remembered how gloatingly he had been watching me; that whole day

long at the palace, I began to imagine all sorts of things about this handsome person and now my mind was inwardly chuckling and my heart was risingly thrilling at the imagination. My body was quivering under the bed-sheet in a sweet sensation of hilarity I was craving for, and now I thanked my mother for bringing it so near at hand. My mind gradually grew lax and lascivious. I argued, "I don't know what my would-be husband will be like. Who knows he may be as dark as my father, the husband of my mother. No wonder that my beautiful mother sought shelter elsewhere. Then why should I lose myself this god-sent opportunity of enjoying myself with a man of rank and beauty?" I thought that thousands of girls would be ready to court friendship with a Maharaja of Hazur's type and would go mad over his handsome countenance. Then why should I not? at that time in the first exuberance of my youth, money-making was secondary consideration with me, though it was always paramount with my mother.

Next morning, as I didn't want to look so cheap in my mother's eyes, I remained mum. She lost her patience and again inundated me with her last night's eloquence, repeating it this time more vehemently and most oratorically. When she finished it out of sheer exhaustion, I only said, 'I can't say 'No' to you,

mother! I know that you would die for money.' I concealed my real sentiments from her.

A look of triumph pervaded her smiling face and she chucklingly rejoined. 'Who would not die for money? Where do you eat your food and wear your clothes from, if not from money? You have no value for money, because you get all your needs ready-made. Don't fail to bring 500 rupees when you return from Vilasbag'. Saying so, she happily went away to the palace on her usual round of duties.

That whole day I spent in ruminating over the anticipations of my unholy honey-moon approaching nearer as the day advanced. My mother returned from the palace in the evening when she said 'Hazur had a talk with me about you. You are to dine with him to-night at Vilasbag. You are indeed a very lucky girl that Huzur has begun to like you so much. The car will come at midnight to fetch you when all are asleep.'

At about quarter to 12 o'clock, Sidik the chauffeur stealthily came to my mother and whispered in her ear something. There upon She came to my bed and said, "Get up, Ganga! The car is come. Take heart. Go and be merry. Sidik is a trustworthy man. Don't be afraid." My mother opened the door on the road-side where the car was standing. The chauffeur at once opened the door of the car, shoved me in, noiselessly

closed it, started the car, whirled it at top-speed and in a couple of minutes crossed a huge garden and stopped it under the portico of a huge bungalow.

There were standing two aged women on the marble steps of the verandah under the portico. One of them opened the door of the car and helped me to alight. Later on, I came to know that she was Halima, an Arab woman and the mother of Sidik, the chauffeur. She was in charge of the bungalow and keeper of the privy purse. The other was Hava, a Mehomedan woman and mother of the gardener. She was Huzur's private cook to prepare meat dishes for him. Both were in Huzur's complete confidence and so was the Chauffeur.

On entering the verandah, Halima whispered in my ear, 'Huzur is upstairs waiting for you, but before we take you upstairs, come with us for a bath and change of dress. That's the standing order of the Huzur. Everything is ready for you.' They took me, to an inner apartment turned into a luxurious bath-room, where they bathed me thoroughly with a sweet-scented soap-cake. Then winding up my body with a big towel, they brought me to a dressing-room furnished with mirrored cup-boards, dressing tables spread with toilette materials and what not. There Halima got me seated on the carpeted floor and pouring deliciously scented hair-oil in the loosened tresses combed and dressed my hair in the latest fashion of a dramatic actress. Then

she puffed my face and powdered my body with the slippery ashes of rose, though I didn't think my complexion needed any artificial colouring. The lips were touched with a rose-coloured french lip stick and so were the eye-brows with a black tiny brush. After the toileting part of the business was over, I was made to put on a fine silk suit - a gold embroidered saree matching with a blouse and a petticoat of the same pattern. The dressing was so light that I hardly felt I had dressed at all. I looked into a mirror and found that my dress was resplendently dazzling but extremely transparent. I felt ashamed in the presence of these two old thickly-dressed women, because my reflection in the mirror was almost looking starry natural. Halima encouraged me. "Beautiful as you already are, you look quite charming now. Hazur is sure to love you. He is eminently fond of this particular type of dressing for his birds. Now follow me. I shall take you upstairs"

My legs trembled as I ascended the steps. I felt extremely nervous as the critical moments were approaching. My heart gave violent beats and my brain was in a whirl. I tripped and would have rolled back the stairs but for my hands catching hold of the banister. Halima came to my aid and holding my hands led me on to the upstairs lobby. She entered a large hall asking me to wait in the lobby. There near the entrance I stood all trembling, sometimes feeling a quivering and

sometimes a thrilling sensation in alternate. It was the scene of a she-goat served with sweets to fatten her by the keeper of a slaughter house. The dumb animal shivers all the same. I was comparing myself with that she-goat before a slaughter-house when I heard Halima uttering "Ji Hazur ! your desired bird is ready. I have bathed it and dressed it. Shall I bring it in ?" Then Halima came to me, pulled me by the hand as she guessed my reluctance, drew me into the hall, closed its entrance-door and went away, downstairs.

There into the hall, I stood transfixed on the spot. I felt that I was dreaming. The thickly carpeted big hall was lit up with the brilliant rays of resplendent light flooding from a dozen electric chandeliers suspended from the picturesque ceiling. The hall was crowded with assortments of soft dainty furniture, paintings, pictures and portraits. I was standing motionless, awed by the royal presence in the midst of elegance, grandeur and luxury. Hazur was sitting on a sofa, a bottle of champagne and two crystal glasses glittering on a silver-plated tripod in front of him. He got up and rather unsteadily came to where I was standing dumbfounded. He caught my wrist, saying ' come, come, beautiful bird ! Don't get frightened. I am neither a lion nor a tiger. I am just an ordinary man. Let us sit on the sofa and talk quietly there.' Speaking thus he dragged me to his sofa and got me seated. He then

sat by my side and poured out some champagne into the two glasses and offered me one. I was still shaking with the ecstasy of a first lover's ticklish touch.

' Ji Hazur ! Pardon me. I don't drink. It's not my habit.' I said tremulously.

' Well ! My beautiful bird ! If you don't take it, make me take it with your soft sweet hands. I command you to do so. Come on.' He spoke with a royal air of graceful serenity.

Though feeling very shy of handling the tumbler, I could not but obey the royal command. My trembling hand held the glass to his lips. He eyed askance at me and then drank it off at a stretch. ' Your mother is a sweet good old lady and I thank her for...' A bell all of a sudden rang somewhere inside the hall. Hazur slowly got up and opened the entrance-door.

' Ji Hazur ! Dinner is ready. Shall I bring it in ?'

I heard Halima's voice in the lobby.

Huzur nodded his head in the affirmative.

' What will the bird eat ? will she take meat ?' Huzur looked at me enquiringly.

' Ji Huzur, I won't touch meat. I have never taken it.

'I am only accustomed to vegetarian diet.' I said. Halima and Hava soon brought two huge circular silver thalis (trays) each containing a dozen of silver bowls within it and spread them on a dining table in an adjoining room.

'Come, beautiful bird ! Let's eat something,' Huzur pulling my hand said.

I followed him to the dining-table and took my seat on a velvety cushioned chair, just opposite to that of the Huzur. Hava stood behind me and Halima behind Huzur to minister to our wants. My thali and bowls were filled to the brim with various sorts of sweet-meats, garlic-scented vegetables, pulses, pickles, rice, curry and what not. Having taken no meal at my place in anticipation of this dinner to which I was formally invited through my mother, I was, at this late hour of 1 p. m. awefully hungry and my appetite sharpened at the sight of delicious rich contents of my tray. "Come, come, eat something. Do you know that this is my supper time at Vilasbag ?" Hazur laughingly remarked.

After he commenced eating from his specially made meat preparations, I began to eat with a heartening relish. I was never served so richly in my life before, and my admiration for his liberality grew proportionately stronger. Admiration usually precedes love and from that I lost all my nervousness and became a bold girl.

After we had finished eating to our heart's content, Hazur ordered Halima and Hava to retire with the trays and they left us there alone.

"Follow me, my beautiful bird ! Let us go to our bed-room," Hazur commanded me.

He took me through a flight of marble stairs on to the terrace, in the centre of which there was but a single large marble apartment. I followed him there. He switched on the lights and the dark apartment became grandly refulgent with the lights of numerous wall-sheds, the glare of which was intensified by man-size mirrors attached to and totally covering the surrounding walls and by the ceiling made of crystal glass alone. I looked round in sheer amazement. The royal bed room was tastefully furnished in the most luxurious oriental fashion. Around the mirrors was a continuous row of ottomans lined with gold-fringed velvets of variegated hues and backed with cushions of scarlet brocade, the glossy bright colour of which was mellowed by the soft muslin spread over the ottomans. The whole floor was spread with embroidered velvet carpet so soft and thick that my feet sank into its silky texture, as I trod upon it.

Whichever way I turned, I beheld my graceful transparent form reflected in those vast mirrors which were set in magnificently gilded frames on the walls. There were no windows on any side of the apartment

except the door-entrance just opposite to the landing of the stair-case and through which I had just entered. In the north-western corner, touching the two walls at right angle, there lay a mosquito-curtained double-sized bed-stead the wooden frame of which was plated with engraven leaves of polished gold the soft satin beds of which were so conducive to the indulgent enjoyment of voluptuous abundance. There he put into my mouth a gold-leaf enveloped pan (betel-leaf) stuffed with fragrant spices of saffron, amber, musk along with some unknown medication which excited my veins and thrilled my physical frame which gradually got hotter and hotter at each swallow of the saliva caused by the chewing of the medicated pan.

Enfolded by the mosquito-curtains, he delivered his curtain-lecture, the rosy flush of champagne being still on his cheeks.

"My beautiful and charming bird ! I was mightily struck by the delicious sweetness of your face and the enchanting symmetry of your form, when I saw you for the first time at Kamala's yesterday morning. I was afflicted with your surpassing beauty which made me so restless. In the evening I made up my mind to capture my beautiful bird at any cost and engage it in the folds of my arms. I called your mother. I find

a little beauty in her too. She must be very beautiful in her teens. I am an adept in that art. None can beat me in that. Last night I brought her here and gave her a taste of champagne and she was all mine. I asked you of her and my joy knew no bounds when she told me that you were a fresh bird. Do you know that as far as possible I go in for fresh birds only? Birds of scattered feathers generally do not interest me so much but sometimes I have to go in for them and employ them as a means to capture birds of unscattered feathers, what I call fresh birds, just as I did in your mother's case."

I little understood the significance of what he was babbling. I could not follow his similes and metaphors of fresh birds and scattered and unscattered feathers. I thought he was merely prattling in the excitement of love combined with intoxication of champagne. Oh God! How I wish I had there and then grasped the full import of what he meant to convey. Perhaps the comprehension would have cautioned me to put myself on the right scent of the matter and incline me to alter the course of my subsequent doings.

At 5 a. m. Halima tapped the door and I opened it. Huzur was still raving half asleep and half awake under the alcoholic influence.

'Get ready. You must reach home before there

"I am but your slave ready to obey your commands" 35

are passers-by on the road,' spoke Halima. Downstairs I changed my dress and put on mine.

'Huzur has commanded me to give these to you.' Saying so, Halima put into my hands a bundle of notes and a small diamond nose-ring.

Sidik the Chauffeur sped me home in the car. I awakened my mother and handed over to her my trophies. She gluttonously counted the notes and exclaimed, 'Huzur is always a fine fellow. He always keeps up his promises.'

I was feeling tired and I straightaway went to bed and did not rise till mid-day next.

CHAPTER VI

The bath duty

Now that the coyness of virginity had left me, I became a little more adventurous. My mother now wished me to go with her to the palace and to assist her in her work and I was glad to do so, as it would give me opportunities of keeping myself near to the royal presence and drawing satisfaction from proximity. It was the practice of Kamalaba to sit for two hours every morning in her worship-room for meditation and prayers, and that was the time for Huzur to take ablutions before his morning ride.

Two or three days after, it happened that whilst I was sweeping the lobby in front of Kamalaba's suite of rooms, I saw Huzur proceeding to his bathroom situated in the corner which joined Kamalaba's and Huzur's suites. I looked at him and thereupon he slightly turning his fingers inwards suggestively signalled me to approach him. I throwing off the broom hastened obediently to his bath-room. By the time I reached it,

he had already entered it. I stood upon the threshold and he pulling me in, shut the door.

‘Come, come, my beautiful bird! I command you to give me a decent bath. Come on, bathe me’ said he, bewitchingly smiling at me.

This time I was no longer nervous. I enthusedly replied ‘Ji Huzur! I am but your slave, ready to obey your commands’ I bathed him with a perfumed soap and a bucketful of rose-water. After his bath was finished, he dragged me to a big man-size English white enamelled tub and pushing me down there exclaimed, ‘Lie down in tub. That’s my command.’ Without my knowing it, he opened a tap and all unawares, a shower of thousand silvery streams of cool water sprinkled its cold sprays over my hot body lying in the tub. It was for the first time in my life that I had a bath in the tub and Huzur began to laugh over my bewilderment.

Since that day, stealthy entry into the royal bath-room at the royal signal became my irregular and clandestine duty. I liked it and enjoyed my every bath in the tub under the showers to my heart’s content. It had grown into a habit with me.

Kamalaba, devoted to her regular morning prayers knew nothing about my clandestine visits to the royal bath-room. My mother coming to know of it from

Nathu, the head-attendant relished it and congratulated me upon my adventurous spirit.

'That's the way,' She said, 'to gain royal good will. Huzur is a generous fellow and he is bound to reward you for the services you are rendering to him.'

The people of the palace came to know of it by and by and they began to regard me as an object of Huzur's exceptional favour. It is the habit of the palace people to respect and flatter those whom they consider to be the recipients of royal special favour, though they gossip about and scandalize them at their back in whispering murmers. But they would never dare say anything in face of the favourite, lest they would incur royal displeasure. The same was the case with me. Now all and sundry in the palace began to salute me and call and address me by the respectful name of 'Shrimati Gangabai.' From the palace people the talk spread to the town and the officers of the state began to pay their respects to me, regarding me to be an approacher nearest to the royal ears.

One day Baburao, the fat Diwan (chief minister) of the State with his bulged-out hemispherical belly passed the lobby to go to Huzur's drawing-room when I accosted him. He joined his hands to salute me and said, 'How do you do, Shrimati Gangabai?'

I was tempted to joke and replied, 'I am alright. Thanks. But I want to tell you one thing. Huzur

dislikes your growing fat and thinks of dismissing you. So you should make serious attempts to reduce your fat.' I laughed and left him.

To my surprise, that very evening Mrs. Baburao, the wife of Diwan Saheb came to my quarters. I thought she had come to reprimand me for the little joke. I had practised upon her husband that morning and I got mightily frightened. I made up my mind to beg her pardon.

'Please convey my apologies to Diwan Saheb for...'

'Why apologies!' She interrupted. 'On the contrary, I have come to ask of you a great favour. I know that you personally possess vast influence over Huzur Saheb and I have come specially to request you to exert it for saving my husband from dismissal. I know that everything lies in your hands. You can make and unmake the ministers. Here is a private reward for you.' Saying so, she took out a diamond ring (which was subsequently sold for Rs. 500) from the pocket of her blouse and put it on the palm of my hand. Adapting myself to this topsy-turvy situation of mine, I said to her in encouragement, 'Oh! I can twist the ear of Huzur before he dares to dismiss your husband.' The poor lady perhaps really thought that I had acquired a position whereby, I could pull Huzur's ears. 'You need not worry, Mrs. Baburao!' I continued, 'so long as I am alive, I shall see that

Diwan Sahab is safe on the post.' She embraced me in sheer joy, heartily thanked me and went away.

Thus the influence in people's imagination acquired by me through bath-room visits continued its sway. By the end of February 1916, Kamalaba gave birth to a son. The joyful event of the birth of Heir-apparent Vijay Sinhji was celebrated throughout the State with the booming of guns. The usual rejoicings followed in its train. The schools and offices were closed and sweets distributed amongst the poor in commemoration of the happy occasion.

Huzur and I celebrated the occasion by a happy visit to Vilasbag, where under the royal command I received from Halima, keeper of the privy purse, gifts of a beautiful pair of pearl ear-pendants and a purse of Rs. 200.

The joyful event had brought Huzur, as he said to me, special joy not so much because of the birth of a heir-apparent but because of the special facilities provided by it. Kamalaba was now in confinement and therefore he was free to do as he liked. Now midnight visits to Vilasbag in the royal car under the royal command were my regular engagements which brought me Rs. 25 nightly, so long as the confinement period lasted. At about the expiration of that period, one day, to my utter bewilderment and dismay, I found that I was carrying. (?)

CHAPTER VII

First Peril of Indiscretion.

The discovery came as a thunderbolt to me. I was awefully perplexed. In the first flush of the fright, I got enraged at my mother. She was the source of all this mischief.

‘Your money-making mission is going to result into your getting a fatherless grand-child.’ I exclaimed in sheer wrath.

‘What of that?’ She said and examined and pressed my abdomen. She declared that it was probably the fourth or fifth month that was going on. I calculated that I must have conceived at the very commencement of my being ushered into the royal bed at Vilasbag. I was overtaken with grief at the sinister mishap and began to weep in sheer remorse : but my mother was as audacious as ever.

‘Don’t mind it, you fool ! That’s nothing. We are not going to commit abortion. That’s certain. I hate abortions. I can arrange all about the de-

livery. None needs know of it. Don't worry. I'll speak to Huzur about it. Generous as he is, he will surely help us. Don't be afraid. Leave the whole thing to me and I shall see it through.'

My mother returning that evening from the palace sullenly told me that she had informed Huzur of my predicament, but on hearing it he uttered not a word and kept studiously mum. I took it very ill and was lying on my bed sobbing and weeping, when Sidik the chauffeur came and delivered to me a big sealed envelope saying 'Huzur has commanded me to deliver this to you.' After he left us, I opened the envelope. It contained a bundle of notes and a note. The note was neither dated nor headed or signed.

Private and confidential.

I am very sorry for the situation you find yourself in. My reputation is at stake. If your condition is known by the people, they will create a row and a huge scandal will follow, spoiling my name and reputation. Kamala must know nothing about it. You must at once leave Suvarnpur and not return until you are free from this trouble. I am herewith enclosing a thousand rupees notes for abortion or labour expenses, whatever you will. Ask your mother to take a long leave from Kamala on some plausible pretext. I must not find you in the palace or in the town tomorrow morning. You must disappear for the time being.

Return as soon as you are free and normal, I don't care by what method. Fly at once. That's my command.

I gave the note and money to my mother. She greedily counted the notes.

'Huzur Sahab' she said with an air of self-satisfaction 'is always a considerate fellow. One thousand rupees would be more than enough for our purpose.' She then read the note.

'I am just going to take leave of Kamalaba,' she said after reading the note. 'We are bound to obey Huzur's commands. I'll say to Kamalaba that your father is dangerously sick at Chandipur and that if he recovers, I have taken a vow to go on a pilgrimage. I'll ask for six months leave. Is that alright, Ganga?'

I nodded my head and she went to the palace for obtaining the necessary leave.

Next day by the morning train, we left Suvarnapur for Chandipur. We wanted to leave Jamna there with my father. It was necessary that no palace people at Chandipur should come to suspect of my condition. We therefore desired to leave Chandipur as soon as possible and my mother suggested that from there we should go to Nadiad, where she intended to hire a house and stay until I was relieved.

'We go to Nadiad,' she informed me, 'because there is an orphanage there called Nadiad Hindu Anathashram. They say orphans are very well looked after there. They have kept in the compound of the orphanage a box set on a pillar where one can privately put an unwanted child. Near the box there is an electric button which when pressed rings a bell in the nurses' quarters of the Ashram. A nurse comes to the box and takes away the deserted child. The box is kept there for the facility of pregnant widows and virgins, so that they may not be tempted to commit abortion or kill the child.'

At Chandipur my father Shambhu, learning of my condition got wild with me and was just starting to beat me with a cane when my mother at once intervened and took him to task

'That's not her fault. I have got it done. You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hound. If you want to earn money, you must take some risk. Nothing venture, nothing have. No gains without pains. It's the favour of Maharaja Saheb of Suvarnapur. What do you know, you sluggard and idler? You are eating the money that we earn for you. Can you fill up our stomachs in your 10 rupees salary? Has anybody made money without obtaining a Raja's favours, you senseless brute!'

My docile father being thus rebuked by my ever audacious mother dropped the cane and into silence and sullenly went away.

After stopping a day at Chandipur, I accompanied by my mother proceeded straight to Nadiad. There my mother hired a top-most story of a house, a little distant from the orphanage. We quietly stayed there for about four months without any incident. In a big place like Nadiad, where we were total strangers, nobody cared to know where we had come from or where we were going or what we were doing. In the fullness of time, I gave birth to a son, my mother acting as a midwife. I remember the birth-date of my son exactly, as it was the Diwali day of the year 1916. I kept my son with me for the full period of my confinement. At last the terrible day of parting came.

'We can't go on like this for ever.' reminded my mother. 'To-day is your last day with the son. To-night I am taking him to the foundling box. Tomorrow morning we go off.'

My heart was cut to the quick. It pained me so much to part with my boy and I was helplessly weeping. I made up my mind not to have any illegitimate child in future. At midnight, when my cruel mother come to take away the child from me, I nestled it to my breast and suckled it, all the while bitterly weep-

ing and bathing my child with my hot tears. Then my mother, wresting it away from me and laying it on her lap said, 'look here, Ganga ! It's no use weeping. Don't be silly. We should not lose all trace between a mother and a child. We must make some indelible mark on it. Someday it may be useful for recognition. Who knows ? Perhaps Huzur may want him in future. Who knows ?' And the cruelty of my stone-hearted mother knew no bounds when she suddenly pierced the sharp nail of her thumb into the soft skin of my child and drew there on the right wrist two lines intersecting in the form of "+".

The helpless child began to cry in pain and when I saw blood pouring out of its wrist, I couldn't stand the sight of it. I got wild, slapped my mother on the face and wrenched my child away from her lap. With tears in my eyes, I took the bleeding wrist into my mouth and began to lick the blood with my tongue, thinking I would thereby assuage the pain of my poor child. I went on licking and sucking the blood till it ceased to ooze and the child became quiet. Then smothering it to my breast, I wept and wept inconsolably till I ceased weeping out of sheer exhaustion. At length I got resigned to my fate, nestled and suckled my child for the last time and steel-heartedly handed it over to my mother for being taken to the foundling box of the orphanage.

. Next day morning we left Nadiad and returned to Chandipur from our painful pilgrimage, the same evening. To keep up appearances and to remove any possible suspicion, we distributed sweets and sugarcanes, customary on a return from pilgrimage, amongst the darbagadh people. We stopped at Chandipur for a couple of days and from there started to go to Suvarnapur. Thus my parents taking me and Jumna with them came back to Suvarnapur to resume their old duties in service of Kamalaba.

On the day next to our arrival at Suvarnapur, I wrote a note to Huzur, at the suggestion of my mother and sent it through Sidik the chauffeur.

'PRIVATE :-Now I am free from trouble and have returned in obedience to your command. I delivered a son to you and parted with him for the sake of your name and reputation. But for this consideration, I would never have parted with the child of my blood. I would rather have incurred all the obloquy and odium of delivering an illegitimate child than parted with it. It was a blow to my heart to have parted with our son. I have wept bitterly over it. But what's done is done. Awaiting your orders.'

We waited for three days but there was no reply. I hoped that he would signal to me while going to his bath-room as before but there was no signal. He did not even care to look at me.

On the fourth day, my mother privately met him and returning from the interview, she complained to me :

' Ganga ! He is a faithless fellow. He is obstinate, too. He plainly says he will have nothing to do with you, until and unless you marry some one of our caste. He proposes, if you care for it, to marry you to his head-attendant Nathu, who lost his wife while we were at Nadiad and who is now a widower. That's what he says. '

I was simply stunned and taken aghast at the attitude he had taken up in respect to myself, though I had already a misgiving that there was something really wrong. I fell into a 'sad reverie of reflections. Then an idea struck my mind to bring him round to his senses and I wrote him the following lines :-

' CONFIDENTIAL :—I did not part with my dear child to marry Nathu or some one else. Now that you have nothing to do with me, I have nothing to do with you. I intend to bring my child from where I have left it, and openly to proclaim to the whole world that it is a child by the Maharaja of Suvarnapur. You see, I cannot afford to lose you and the child both. Do what you like. '

This note had its instantaneous effect. The very night Sidik the Chauffeur approached me.

' Huzur has commanded you to meet him at

‘Vilasbag’ He communicated the message. ‘He desires to talk in private with you. Come. The car is ready.’

I immediately sped to Vilasbag and straightaway entered the upstairs hall, without making any fuss of a bath and change of dress, according to customary command. He was, as usual, sitting on his sofa with his glasses and whisky and soda. I took courage in both hands and spoke, ‘I have come. Why did you send for me?’ Sipping his glass, he said :

‘Gangabai!’ I remarked that there was now no address of a beautiful bird. ‘It seems you have entirely misunderstood me. I never meant to desert you altogether, I proposed marriage simply for our mutual protection so that no need would arise to part with a child any further. Marry Nathu or any one of your caste whom you can legally marry but you must marry. That’s a condition precedent to my now being able to mate with you. Don’t you see that is the only safest course which would enable us to enjoy without any fetters? Now suppose that before you came to me, you had been a married woman. Would then have arisen any necessity to throw away our son? Don’t you think that marriage would be the best safeguard; in case you conceived again? I think it would be the best buffer to protect

my reputation as well as yours. What do you think ? you are a wise girl.'

I realized that what he was proposing me to do was not without sound and cogent reason behind it.

'As you wish and command' I tremulously replied 'I may marry Nathu but I tell you, he will only be my nominal husband. One can't marry without heart in it.'

'After all Nathu will be your husband as you say, but if you'll deny him his marital rights, I am afraid, the palace people will create a huge row. The thing is bound to be out. After all, no husband likes to have a merely nominal wife and you have got to behave as a real wife in order to avoid all suspicion. That's my command. You must marry Nathu. You see how it would make things so easy for us. We can then do fearlessly what we like. Before you go, you must promise me that you shall marry Nathu as early as possible. Will you promise ?'

'I obey your command. I promise.'

'Then some day I shall call you after the marriage. Don't worry. You can go now.'

I went downstairs, gladly thinking that after marriage I would be able to freely indulge in my amours with

Huzur without entertaining any apprehension of carrying an illegitimate child from him. Downstairs Halima said to me, " Hazur has commanded me to give you a thousand rupees towards your marriage expenses. May you and your husband live long and be prosperous.' Putting her hand on my head in blessing, she handed over to me a bundle of the notes.

CHAPTER VIII

My Legal Husband

I was eager to hurry up my marriage with Nathu so that I would be able to resume my amorous relations with Huzur, without any fear on the score of conception. Within a fortnight the marriage-day was announced and after going through customary nuptial ceremonies, Nathu became my legal husband. Huzur and Kamalaba blessed the marriage with gifts of poshak (garments and ornaments). Kamalaba, as innocent and pious as ever, was ignorant of what was going on behind the curtains. She blessed me with all the fervour of an elder sister when I approached her to pay my obeisance as a bride.

Nathu was about 35 years of age. Fortunately for me, his late wife had left no issue behind her. He was all alone in his family and so at my wish, he came to reside at my own place. I did not consider him to be a fit and proper mate for me. He, too, knew from my past clandestine visits to the bath-room

at the palace that I was no longer a *virgo-intacta* bride. He had married me because of the royal command, which he could disobey only on peril of dismissal. So there was not much love lost between us. I was a tall robust girl of 17 and he was a short lean man of double my age. All the same to my surprize, I found him very enthusiastic at his honey-mooning with me. First it seemed to me that my irresistible beauty had made up for its lost virtues. But soon after, I detected the real reason. I discovered from the smell of his mouth that he was drunk. Intoxicated as he was, I found him extremely mischievous and indecently frivolous and I had to pass through a great ordeal before I could successfully resist him.

I didn't want to pass through the same sort of ordeal over again and I was seriously put to thinking out some remedy. I couldn't bring myself to put up with his dense behaviour which I regarded as loathsome and brutal in contrast with that of Huzur to which I had been accustomed. I therefore wanted him to harass me no further and to keep quiet with me. I hit upon a systematic plan. At my request, Sidik the chauffeur got me a dozen bottles of strong native alcoholic liquor costing me 84 rupees.

On the second night of his honey-moon, when Nathu tried to approach me, I humoured him for a while and

then offered him a glass of the sparkling liquor. Exhibiting a great relish, he drank it off and soon fell into a heavy torpor. I thanked, in my mind, Sidik the chauffeur for bringing me such a powerful magic. Thereafter by the magic wand of this stupefying beverage, I saved myself from the legal demands of my lawfully wedded husband.

CHAPTER IX

Sidik, the Chauffeur

I passed my marital state in this manner virgo-intacta with respect to my husband for a whole long month and there was no sign of any overture from Huzur. I now fully realized that he had played a trick with me and forced marriage on me in order to disable me from making any attempt to expose him in future, because no husbanded woman after marriage would dare to proclaim her own shame or sin committed in pre-marital stage. It struck me that he was now free from any apprehension of my turning round and divulging the secret and that this compulsory marriage had lost me my upper hand of intimidating him and keeping him to my subjection. That he wanted me no more I was convinced. I hated Nathu for my mate and so now I began to feel the sting of a solitary tedious and manless life, habituated as I had been to an excited emotional life. All hopes and expectations of partaking the royal luxurious pleasures and receiving of royal cash gifts had vanished into the thin air.

I felt sore at heart and hankered for some relief. Once I was standing at my window aimlessly watching the passers-by on the road to divert my mind from sad reflections which were embittering my disappointed heart. I saw Sidik the chauffeur passing by, on foot and called him to the window. I wanted to learn something from him about the present private activities of Huzur. I Knew that, Halima and Hava apart, he was in the confidence of Huzur and therefore in the know of things.

'What news of Huzur Saheb ?' I asked him.

'No news in particular.'

'Is he visiting Vilasbag, now-a-days ?'

'Yes off and on'

'What's he doing there ?'

'He has found a new bird.'

'Who is she ?'

'I won't, tell you that. I don't want to lose my service.'

'Does he ever remember me ?'

'I don't think'

'Then would you suggest what I should do ? I feel very lonely'

'But you have got your husband Nathu.'

'Nathu is no husband. He is not a fit mate for

me. I hate that drunkard. He is no use to me.'

'Then who, do you think, is a fit mate for you?'

'Only Huzur.'

'I think you are walking in a fools' paradise. You do not know Huzur. I know him. After leaving off a bird, he never looks at it. You don't know his habit. He's always on the look-out for a change. That's his habit '

My inner conviction got its confirmation. But a fool as I was, I was still hoping against hope.

'Please show me, I beseech you. Is there any way to regain him? I can't allow that paradise to be lost. I find life so tedious. Please show me a way out of it. You know him best. You must help me. I shall give you a share in my trophies.'

'I may show you a way, but not at present.'

'Then when?' I impatiently questioned.

'You say you hate Nathu. Huzur is inaccessible. you must therefore have some man who loves you enough to help you. I don't want a share in your trophies.'

I fully understood what he meant to convey, but I wanted him to make his hint more clear.

'Suppose you proposed to me that you loved me enough. Then how are you going to help me?'

'My mere proposing would not satisfy me. I should love you and you should make it possible for me to love you, just as you made it possible for Huzur.'

I patiently listened to his overture. I wanted him to take me into his confidence, without which, I thought, I could not regain my lost paradise. I was yearning to pry into the secrets of my lost royal paramour and I could not learn of them, unless I humoured the royal chauffeur and even submitted myself to his caresses in case of extreme necessity.

I was then in such a frame of mind that I wanted to leave no stone unturned in my exertions to regain my former position even if I had to make bodily sacrifice to achieve my desired end.

'Sidik ! I would like to test how far you can love me, before I would like to love you,' I humoured him.

Sidik was over-exulted with joy at my provisional experimental consent.

'Then when and where shall we meet?' He impatiently asked.

'Can you take me out in the car, any midnight, when it's not engaged?' I again humoured him and enquired.

'Yes. Of course,' He enthusedly replied.

'Are you engaged to-night?' I wanted to know how far Huzur was busy with his new bird.

'I ca'nt say. I have not yet received Huzur's orders.'

'Doesn't matter. You do one thing. To-day or to-morrow or the day after, whenever you are free from engagement, bring the car at about 11 p. m. and ring the horn. By the time, Nathu goes to bed. We shall go together for a joy-ride.' I instructed him. 'That's O. K. I'll try to give you a nice time of it' said he, twitching his eye and went away.

x x x x

On the third day following the interview at the window, Sidik came to me in the morning. 'Huzur has just left for a tiger-hunting expedition'. He informed me and said, 'I may bring the car and sound the horn, if you have not changed [your mind']

'No. I haven't changed my mind. It all depends on you. Please do bring the car and we go for a joy-ride.'

That night, when my husband came in to my bedroom, I gave him a rather strong doze of the magic beverage and he soon collapsed into a sound snoring sleep

On hearing the sound of the horn, I told my mother that I felt much tired and therefore wanted to go out for a drive in Huzur's car, which had been placed at my disposal in his absence. My mother did not yet know that Huzur had completely deserted me.

She presumed from the presence of the car on the road that I was still in his good books.

'You can't afford to go out at a time like this,' She warned me. 'After all, the Chauffeur is a stranger.'

'Sidik is a man of Huzur's confidence,' I said.

'You know it. He dares not touch me or do me any mischief. If he does, I would complain to Huzur and I am sure, he would be severely belaboured and chastised by him. How can he dare to touch Huzur's own mistress ?'

'Then you may go but take care,' she assented.

I seated myself on the back seat of the car. After leaving the outskirts of the city, Sidik stopped the car and invited me to sit by his side at the wheel. I did so and commenced the promised joy-ride.

'My dear !' He said, putting his warm arm behind my neck, 'I have arranged with my mother. Tonight there will be none coming to Vilasbag. We go there if you don't mind my mother and Hava. You can trust them We shall make merry there '

"Yes. I don't mind Halima or Hava or anybody. We do go to Vilasbag where we can talk privately and at ease.'

The bungalow was all dark and locked up. Sidik stopped the car under the portico and went to his mother's

quarters to fetch the keys. Bringing the keys, he opened the folding gate of the verandah, switched on the lights and we entered and went up to the terrace. Now I was in the same familiar royal bedroom but with a different man. I switched on all the wall-sheds and the whole bedroom was flooded with the blaze.

There sitting on an ottoman, I commenced my task.

‘What were you doing, Sidik, these last two days? I was counting the hours, since I promised you a trial love’

‘The car had been kept engaged,’ he falteringly replied.

‘Now tell me everything. Who was using the car? What for?’

‘I can’t tell you. I am sorry. If Huzur comes to know of it he would flay me alive with his horse-whip.’

‘Rest assured that I wan’t tell anybody. I promise. Now that you are going to love me, you should not keep anything secret from me and if you want me to love you, you should not hide anything from me. Do you want to love me or not?’

‘Yes I do want to love you but.....’

‘But me no buts,’ I interrupted. ‘If you refuse to

place any confidence in me, of what use is your love to me? Well, I am just going away.'

I rose from the ottoman, but he pulled my hand and did not let me go.

'Please sit down. I'll tell you. It was the Head-Mistress of the girls' high school.' He hesitantly said.

'How old is she?'

'About 30'

'Much older than Huzur's age then!'

'Yes'

'Is she a fresh bird? She can't be a fresh bird at that age.'

'I don't know. She is a spinster.'

'What's her name?'

'Miss Seetabai.'

'Is she a Brahmin?'

'No. A christian.'

'A christian with a Hindoo name? I wonder.'

'They say her parents were originally Chamars (dealers in hides and bones), but they converted to Christianity.'

'Oh! I see How long is she here?'

'She came about a month ago and then Huzur appointed her.'

' On what pay ? '

' Rs. 75 a month. She is an under-graduate. '

' She came here all the nights, since her appointment ? '

' No. She came here last five before Huzur left. '

' Did she come before that ? '

' No. '

' Is she beautiful ? '

' Yes, but not so beautiful. You are far more beautiful. '

' Then how is't that Huzur has caught such an old bird of 30 ? '

' That's because she is Head-Mistress of a girls' school and not Head-Master of a boys' school. '

' But why should Huzur select so old a bird like that ? I fail to understand. He can get younger and more beautiful birds. He is too generous not to get them. '

' You are a simple-hearted woman. That's why you fail to understand. You see, he pampers the Head-Mistress with a view to get younger and more beautiful birds. There are many in the Boarding House of her school. He can't find fresh birds so easily elsewhere. The first thing Huzur did after his installation on the gadi, was to build up this

Boarding House at a cost of a lac of rupees. It has accomodation for a hundred inmates free of charge. '

'Then he seems to be a veteran educationalist. '

'Yes. No doubt, but for females only. He is regarded by the Government and the public the greatest votary of female education 'that India has ever produced, since he made education for the girls of his state free and compulsory. But since the visits of Miss Seetabai here, both Halima and Hava are afraid that he might make every High School student girl's visit to Vilasbag compulsory,' Sidik laughed sarcastically.

'Is the boys' education not free and compulsory in the state?'

'Neither free nor compulsory. Huzur is only a protagonist of female education. He doesn't believe in male education. '

I reflected for a while. Suddenly I remembered Huzur's curtain-lecture on the first night of my visit to him wherein he had stated that he went in for birds of scattered feathers only with a view to capture those of unscattered feathers. Now I fully grasped the meaning of these similes and metaphors of his. But then it was too late. In the meanwhile, I had dearly paid the penalty by way of begetting a spurious child.

‘Does Miss Seetabai receive any gifts from Huzur?’

‘Only Rs. 25 every time she comes here. Halima tells me so.’

Now that Sidik had reposed his entire confidence in me and stated facts frankly, I began to love him.

CHAPTER X

Prostration under the Pulung *

Next day, Huzur had not yet returned from his tiger-hunting expedition. So it was my second joy-ride with Sidik that night. We were sitting on the ottoman at ease and gossiping playfully in the royal bed-room with flooded lights. All of a sudden, we heard sounds of the clatter of hoofs of horses and the rattle of wheels of a carriage. We were startled. Halima ran up to us and ejaculated.

‘Hide ! hide ! Sidik ! Ganga ! Where are you ?
Huzur is come. He is just coming upstairs.’

She in a moment switched off the lights and hurried away downstairs. The bed-room was thrown in utter darkness. We were awfully distressed and terror-stricken. In the dark, present-minded Sidik caught up my arm and dragged me towards the royal pulung, the location of which was familiar to us. He whispered in my ear ‘Let us hide ourselves underneath the pulung. We

* a comfortable big bed.

then slipped into the hollow space beneath, as far inside as we could go and touched the walls and lay down there hustled up on the floor. We were almost breathless, when Halima again entered the room and switched on the lights.

She was looking around in search of us when Huzur entered. I was frozen.

'Halima !' He angrily ejaculated. 'Where is that ass Sidik ?' Sidik too was frozen. 'I didn't find him at the palace. I wanted to come here in the car but the big fool was not there. Don't you see that I had to come in a horse-carriage ? And I find the car lying here under the portico. He is a budmash. Where is that stupid ass ? Bring me my horse-whip.'

Seeking my protection, shaking Sidik hid his head under the folds of my saree.

'Ji Huzur ! Huzur !' Halima faltered. Then recovering her presence of mind she concocted a story, actuated by maternal instinct. 'At the palace, he was in high fever. There was nobody to look after him there. He was not able to walk. So he came away here in the car. He is still in high fever, lying on the floor of my house and breathing hard.' I found that Sidik was actually breathing hard. 'He says he got severe shivering before he caught fever. I think it's an attack of malaria.'

Sidik ceased to shiver and took his head off from the folds of my saree in token of relief. Huzur got quiet at the offered explanation and said :

‘Is that so ? But I wanted him to bring Miss Seeta in the car. Now who will go ?’

‘Ji Huzur ! Shall I go in the carriage and bring her ?’ Halima offered her service.

‘You are a big she-donkey. Should our coachman know it ? I have already dismissed the carriage. It will come to fetch me at 5 a. m. in the early morning. Now Halima ! You do one thing. You go, hire a carriage and bring the Head-Mistress at once.’

Halima went away, to execute the midnightly royal command. Huzur, after pressing an electric button, sat on the ottoman set against the opposite wall. From underneath the pulung, we could see his whole sitting posture and Sidik again began to shake. Hava came in answer to the bell.

‘Bring bottle and glasses and soda,’ Huzur commanded her.

Hava returned with whisky, soda-water bottles and tumblers. Huzur mixed some whisky and soda into a tumbler and drank it off.

‘Hava ! I bagged two tigresses. What do you say ?’ he bragged.

'Ji Huzur ! Everybody knows that you are a clever marksman,' Hava flattered.

'I have ordered their heads and hides to be brought here to decorate this bed-room. Though the heads are ferocious with their drawn-out tongues, the hides are a very fine specimen of silky spotted texture. I always like the skins of tigresses. They are so smooth. I am going to have them spread on the pulung.' Huzur and Hava looked towards the pulung and our skins went cold.

'Hava ! Did any bird come here in my absence ?'

'Ji Huzur ! Nobody came.'

'That's alright. Do you know, Hava, what's that bird Ganga doing now ?' How does she fare with her husband Nathu ?'

Now it was my turn to shake.

'Ji Huzur ! I don't know but they say that she doesn't like Nathu. She keeps him at an arm's length, as the rumour goes.'

'Does she misbehave with any man ?'

Sidik was perspiring.

'I don't know, Huzur ! I have not heard of it.'

'Well ! If you hear of it, let me know at once. Tell Halima also to inform me, if she hears of it.'

She should not be faithless to her husband or to me. Not because she is Nathu's wife but because I don't like a bird that fell once into my hands to fall into the hands of any other man. I detest it I would severely horse-whip both the man and the girl tied together. '

I, in sheer fright, hid my head in Sidik's coat.

'But Halima was telling me.....that...' Hava faltered. I perspired. Sidik sweated.

'What was she telling you ? Speak. Don't be afraid,' Huzur encouraged Hava.

'Forgive me, Huzur ! Halima was telling me that you had given up a young swan like Ganga for an old crow like Seeta. '

Relieved from the crisis, I took out a handkerchief from the pocket of my blouse and wiped away the perspiration.

'Halima was telling you so, but what's *your* opinion ?'

'Ji Huzur ! I too am wondering that you have given up Ganga. She is far more beautiful than Seeta. Ganga is a nymph. What is Seeta before her ?'

'You don't know, Hava ! I have taken up the old crow Seeta to capture young swans like Ganga. Ganga is no good for me now. She is no longer a fresh bird. You'll shortly see that I am getting

swans both fresh and young through this old crow Seeta,' Huzur 'prognosticated.

'Ji Huzur ! Your bird is ready. I have bathed it and dressed it. Shall I bring it in ?' Halima entered and informed Huzur.

'Yes Bring it in, atonce.'

After ushering Seeta, Halima and Hava left the bed-room.

'Most welcome, miss Seeta. How do you do ? Excuse me, I couldn't send you my car. My chauffeur is in high fever,' Huzur got up and shook hand with Miss Seeta.

Seeta sat close by him on the ottoman. I could fully view her from my hiding-place. She was tall and thin like a bamboo stick, with a wheatish-dark elongated face and extremely slender at the waist. Her narrow eyes were sparkling through rimless spectacles. Her tresses of glossy black hair were parted in the centre in such a fashion that both the sides touched her eye-brows, leaving little margin for her narrow forehead.

Folds of her transparent saree on the right shoulder were fastened with a brilliant safety-pin. To my eye, she looked more fashionable than ugly.

'When did you come ?' asked Seeta. 'I was waiting and waiting for your call.'

Huzur poured some whisky in the other tumbler and mixed it with soda.

‘I went out for a tiger-hunt. I returned a couple of hours ago. Immediately I came here, I sent for you.’

He held the glass to her lips and said, ‘my charming lady! Have it.’

‘Thanks’ She took the glass from his hand.

‘And so you were out on a tiger-hunt. What did you score?’ enquired Seeta, sipping from the glass.

‘I bagged two tigresses’

‘Oh! My brave fellow! I congratulate you. It's no joke to hunt tigresses. They are more dangerous than tigers. I know it's very very risky to shoot tigresses. They pounce upon you, if you are not wary and careful.’

‘Yes, no doubt, it's risky to hunt tigresses. That's why I always keep myself at a safe distance high up on a wooden stall specially created for me on the branches of a tall tree. There they can't harm me. you see, one of the tigresses actually jumped at me, although I was seated so high. Had I not been in that exalted position, I would have been badly mauled by her. But my position miraculously saved me. Of course, I ins-

stantaneously shot at her belly. She screamed and dropped down lifeless on the grass, her fierce eyes staring at me. I have now decided to give up hunting, if I can get some other suitable sport for my entertainment. But, my dear miss Seeta ! The other sport is of such a nature as would require *your* assistance !

‘What kind of sport is it that you require my assistance ? I am always ready to give it, you know. I would die to do anything for your sake, dear !’

‘Yes, I know what sacrifice you can make for me. I know that you would die to do anything for me. That’s why I have been incited to obtain your assistance. I promise that your assistance in the matter will be amply rewarded, my dear !’

‘Yes. But what’s the matter ?’ said Seeta.

‘Look here, Seeta ! I mean to be bold and frank with you. I know that you are always an obliging woman. I could never dream that you would ever disappoint me, so great and devoted is your affection for me. I hear there is a lot of fresh birds in your boarding-house. I want you to hunt them for me. That’s the sport I am craving for. You shall get a thousand rupees per every fresh bird you are able to persuade to be brought here.’

I saw that the Head-Mistress' mouth watered at the tremendous offer, just as my mother's mouth had watered before. Her face beamed at the prospect.

'I shall try my level best for you, my dear!'
Seeta said.

'That's alright then. Have another glass. Then we go to bed.'

When Huzur followed by Seeta proceeded to bed, cold tremor passed through the whole frame of my perspiring body. When they approached the bed, Sidik shook by my side like an earth-quake. Huzur then switched off the lights before mounting the bed. We heaved a sigh of relief. We caught the opportunity of flying away, as soon as the inmates of the upper berth ceased to talk and became quiet. Probably they had fallen into restful slumber. In the dark, Sidik and I, the inmates of the lower berth, cautiously slipped out from underneath the bed and soundlessly feeling our way and noiselessly walking, thanks to the carpet, on the toes of our feet, hurried out of the royal bed-room and breathlessly ran downstairs.

Halima and Hava breathed sighs of relief at seeing us safely descended.

'Oh! my dear children!' cried out Halima.

'I was on the tenterhooks of agony and suspense all the while. Thank Allah! He has saved you. You

would have been whipped and flogged, had you been caught by Huzur Saheb. Now that you are safe, I shall offer two cocoanuts to my Pirdada. Go and fly away. Now don't wait a minute here. '

We ran up the garden and opening the gate, reached the road and from there plodded our way to the palace, at last reaching our quarters after a two mile brisk midnight walk, which ultimately brought me a sound sleep. But I can never forget that memorable night, which gave us a joy-ride while speeding to and the run on foot while trudging from Vilasbag, where we had been served with alternate doses of terror and horror, fright and fear, tremble and tremor, shake and quake, shiver and quiver and sweat and surge.

CHAPTER XI

Sale of Sister's Virtue

I cared a twopence for the frightful threats communicated by Huzur to Hava in respect of my behaviour. I was too far advanced in my love for Sidik to care for royal threats. I loved him for his alacrity and presence of mind. He had run to my succour on that memorable night and the calamity of that night had brought us two strange bed-fellows closer together. He was a youth of the virile Arab race. Though a bachelor, he was not a novice in the art of love-making and I was practically bereft of all enjoyment since the discovery of my pregnant condition eight months ago. I therefore, secretly continued my amours with Sidik either in the car or at Vilasbag, whenever opportunities occurred.

About four months later, at her importunities, my mother was called away by Raja Saheb of Chandipur. Shrewdly enough, the Raja Saheb also called away her husband-my father- so as to avoid all risk arising from a legal husband's absence. So my parents left for

Chandipur, leaving my younger sister Jumna to my care. At the request of my mother before she departed, Kamalaba appointed me as her chamber-maid on the same salary which my mother received viz. Rs 15. p. m.

‘Ganga ! I now find nothing here that is of any interest to me,’ before leaving, my mother had said. ‘So long as you were making money from Huzur Saheb, it was alright. But now it seems there is no chance from that quarter. We can’t go on like this without money for ever. I must do something to make money. It’s no use sitting idle here. I must go to Chandipur where I have got standing chances of making a little money from favours of Raja Saheb ’

So now my husband Nathu, my sister and myself were the only inmates of my house.

Some eight months after the departure of my parents, I gave birth to a daughter, in the eyes of the world my legal husband Nathu’s daughter, but in fact my illegal paramour Sidik’s daughter. The little girl, unfortunately, did not survive and died of influenza in the epidemic of 1918.

After my daughter’s death, life went on placidly for about two years without any noteworthy incident. Of course, I carried on my intrigues with Sidik. I was so much enamoured of him that I did not devote any

thought to Huzur. To the latter I had grown absolutely indifferent and never cared to enquire what he was doing. Blind fascination for the vigorous Arab had made me lose all interest in the disgusting activities of the ever fresh-bird-finding Rajput.

I could find only one fault with Sidik in his conduct to me and it was that he was often asking for money. It wasn't that I grudged giving him money. On the contrary, out of genuine feelings of my true love for him, I would have given away to him the kingdoms of Samarkand and Bokhara had I possessed them, but I had practically little money left with me. All the cash and jewels that I had received from Huzur had been carried away by my greedy mother to Chandipur. Yet, off and on I gave small sums to Sidik out of the small salaries that Nathu and I brought.

On one winter evening in 1920, while I was on duty at the palace, all of a sudden Huzur called me to his royal presence. Since my last visit to him in the year 1916 when he had tricked me into a marriage, he had never cared to know where I was rotting. I therefore wondered why I was sent for. When I entered his drawing-room, I found him busy with his alcohol which had now reduced him to a state of pallor and emaciation. As soon as he saw me, he ejaculated,

'I hear you have a fresh bird in your possession. How old is it?'

In sheer anger, I remained mum,

'Well! I would like to see it. They say it is a very charming bird-as charming as you once were.'

I felt immensely disgusted with him for his adding insult to injury. Without speaking a word, I hurriedly left the drawing-room and went away.

I made up my mind that, come what may, I would never hand over the virtue of my poor innocent sister Jumna to the lust of Huzur. I also conjectured that probably it might be Sidik who must have apprised him of the existence of my younger sister.

That very night, Sidik came to me and intimated that it was the command of Huzur that I should see him at Vilasbag and that he had brought the car for the purpose.

'No. I am not going to come. Let you and Huzur both go to hell. I don't care!' I point-blank ejaculated in the first outburst of my rage. 'Let Huzur do his worst. I think it's you who informed him about Jumna.'

I was surprized that Sidik was laughing in spite of my wrath.

'Yes, My dear ! Don't get angry with me. Be calm,' he said. 'I have done it, I admit, and I have done it for your good as well as for my own good. Hear me patiently. I just had a talk with Huzur and he proposed that he would be pleased to engage Jumna, as his mistress in pay, for a fixed salary of Rs. 1000 per month. Imagine ! Ganga ! Imagine ! A thousand a month ! Such a big sum ! We can't do without money, my dear ! Perhaps you can do without it but I can't. I won't let you go this opportunity. You know, it's only money that more go If you'll let go this opportunity, I tell you, you'll regret it afterwards. Then don't find fault with me. So better come and settle the terms with Huzur. That's why he has called you at Vilasbag to talk the matter over.'

I was in a fix. To go or not to go was the question. I began to consider the pros and cons. My lover Sidik was always in need of money and I was not able to satisfy him in that respect to his heart's content. I was under the constant apprehension that I would lose him some day on this account and I did not want to lose his love and friendship. At that time I was in such a frame of mind that I would rather die than lose his love and friendship. His Arabian virility had mesmerised me and I had already fallen a willing victim to the hypnotic influence of his manhood and

vigour which I invariably found too seductive to be resistible. Besides there was a veiled threat in what he had just told me. What was uptil now a mere vague apprehension on my part had turned into an actual definite fear and I could not brook even the idea of separating from him. I thought I would rather commit suicide than let him desert me. Such was the state of my madness for him at that time. It was for the sake of preserving him intact to me that the temptation of earning filthy lucre and of sacrificing the virtue of my sister to that end, overpowered me.

‘Yes, I am coming,’ said I, at last, but with a biting conscience.

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At Vilasbag, Huzur was seated in the drawing-room with his whisky. He did not see me before I actually stood before him. When he saw me, he held up his glass and said, “Come, come. Don’t you stand there like a statue. Are you afraid, I would touch you ? No, no. I am not going to touch without permission. Do I not know that you are somebody else’s wife ? No I won’t touch you. Please sit on that sofa.” I marked that he was a little bit tipsy. I sat on a sofa just opposite to his. Then he remained staring at me for some time, while sipping the raw whisky.

‘Look here, Ganga ! This time I am going to be

a business man with you. A pucca business man !
I propose to engage.....what's her name, Ganga ?'

'Jumna.'

'Oh ! Ganga and Jumna. Jumna and Ganga. I remember. yes, yes I remember. I think Ganga and Jumna are the two holy rivers of Hindustan. And what are you, the two sisters ? The two sisters Ganga and Jumna. Holy or unholy ? No, no. Holy, holy. Holier, holiest. You two sisters are holiest, holiest. And so, yes, what was I talking ? I forget.'

'Ji Huzur ! you were talking that you proposed some kind of engagement.'

'Yes. Dash this memory ! Now-a-days it often fails me.'

'Forgive me, Huzur, if I say that memory totally fails where there is habitual over-drinking of raw wines. I pray to you to discard that bottle of whisky before memory totally fails.'

'But if I discard it altogether, I would utterly lose my memory. Not only that, but I would go mad without it. Yes, but I am digressing, you see. I propose to engage your sister as my mistress. Yes, as my regular mistress. She will get a fixed pāy

of rupees one thousand per month. You see, twelve thousand a year. I can give you the first month's salary in advance, you see, in advance, advance. Do you agree? If you agree, say 'yes.' If you don't, say 'no.' The bargain lies with you. I have expressed my readiness to pay a fancy price for the commodity. If you close the bargain, well and good. Otherwise I would know how to make my own arrangements. You see, I am giving your sister a preference. There are others ready to become my mistresses at a far less salary.' 'I will consult my sister,' I replied, 'and let you know.' 'No, that won't do. Don't befool me. I know that your sister is entirely in your own hands. Unfortunately, your mother is not here. Otherwise there would have been no hitch in the bargain. You must say 'yes' or 'no', here and now.'

'Yes Huzur! I agree,' I mechanically answered.
'I will bring Jumna to-morrow.'

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Next day. I acquainted Jumna with the terms of the agreement and said to her, 'Huzur saheb is pleased to give you 1000 rupees a month.'

'What for?' She asked.

'You are engaged to be his mistress. You see, you are going to get rupees thousand a month.'

Is it not a staggering salary ? We will both enjoy on that money. '

'That's alright. But what work shall I have to do there at Vilasbag ?'

I came to realize that Jumna had yet no idea of the functions of sex. She was 14 completed. She was delicate and slender in body, though in normal health. She was shy and reserved by nature, confined herself to sundry household work and rarely came in contact with outside world. After bringing her to Suvarnapur in 1915, my parents had neglected her education and she was a booby. I was perplexed. I was too much ashamed to explain to her the nature of duties she would be required to perform at the royal behest. I had not that audacity which my mother possessed.

'You do as Huzursaheb wishes you to do,' I tersely said to her, 'and you will learn your duties by and by.'

That night after we arrived at Vilasbag, Halima took Jumna to the bath-room. She hesitated.

'Jumna ! We can't go before Huzur saheb without cleaning and dressing properly,' I explained to her.

After dressing, when she felt extremely ashamed at her transparent clothing. I said to her: 'We have to put on a dress such as Huzur Sahab likes and not such as we like.'

The one trait in my sister was that she was obediently submissive to whatever I suggested her to do, and so I experienced no special difficulty on her account.

I took her upstairs to the terrace. Huzur was awaiting us in the bedroom. Jumna followed me there.

‘Ji Huzur ! I request you to make a special favour on me and that is, not to offer my poor sister any drink,’ I besought.

‘That’s alright. Anything else ?’

‘Please command Halimabai to pay over the promised advance.’

Huzur wrote a line on a bit of paper and handing it over to me said, ‘show it to Halima and she will pay.’ Downstairs I received from Halima Jumna’s first month’s salary in advance, out of which I gave Rs 100 to Sidik Rs 50 to Halima and Rs 50 to Hava. They were all mightily pleased. Sidik and I, then, went to his mother’s quarters where we rested until Jumna returned at early dawn. After coming home, I marked that Jumna did not exhibit any enthusiasm and was as placid as ever. I found to my regret that she was yet too immature to experience the thrill of youth. At the same time, she did not utter a word of complaint. She was fond of nice clothes. So I bought her several suits of silk and linen and she was pleased.

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At the end of the month, Huzur called me to his presence and to my greatest amazement said to me,

‘ Well, Ganga, from tomorrow, I intend to bring a fresh bird. It's not that I want to cancel the engagement of your sister but one does not desire the service of the same food over and over again. If your sister wants to continue her engagement, it's alright I don't mind it. If she wants to discontinue it, it's alright. I give you my mind. I don't want to practise any deception upon you. I have decided to engage the other fresh bird from tomorrow. Your sister is also welcome, if you are so inclined.’

‘ Do as you please, ’ I angrily ejaculated. ‘ We are not coming from tomorrow. That's certain. I never dreamt that you would dupe me into selling virginity of my virtuous sister like this. I am fed up with you and I am damnedly fed up with this fresh-bird hutting business of yours. You will see our faces no more. I am done up with you. But then you are bound to give us the salary of a month of notice. Do you pay or not?’

Halima paid me, but this time I was crying and sobbing in anger and anguish, while counting the notes. Since then, I cherished a deep grudge and was looking forward to opportunities for satisfying the same against the robber of my sister's virtue.

CHAPTER XII

Second Peril of Indiscretion

Some three months later, one day when I returned from duty, I found Jumna weeping. Instinctively I suspected it and found the same story over again—'carrying', I solaced her after the manner of my mother and she became quiet. I requested her not to worry and told her that I would see to it that no harm resulted to her. My previous experience served me in good stead here. I didn't want my mother to come back to Suvarnapur and make a row of it with Huzur. I was dead certain that if I informed her, she would jump to make of it an earning proposition. I therefore, studiously withheld the news from her. I also didn't let Huzur know of the incident because I was quite sure that he would dismiss us from Suvarnapur, as he had done in my case before. I therefore wanted to keep the whole affair a secret from him. Nor did I let it be known to Sidik. I took Nathu in my confidence, as he was not in a position to divulge the secret, his master being concerned in it. As already

stated, Jumna was very reserved by nature, habit and temperament, and consequently seldom stirred out of the house. Yet I warned her not to stir out of the house at all, until the delivery was safely effected.

I remembered my mother's fore-sighted advice 'You should never lose all connection between mother and child,' but this time, I had made up my mind not to exercise any cruelty on the would-be child of my sister, as was done by my mother in the case of my son. At the same time, I wanted to expose the criminal father of my sister's child, if I possibly could do so. Accordingly, I had formulated my plan in advance and made all preliminary preparations for the disposal of the child as soon as it was born.

About the end of the year 1920 - I don't remember the exact date - Jumna gave birth to a daughter after going through a great travail of a very painful labour. She was already delicate in body and premature conception had developed an anaemic condition during pregnancy. I acted as a midwife and as soon as she brought forth the child and was relieved of the attendant pain, I took a small piece of a square paper and inscribed on it in small letters :-

'This girl-child is daughter to Maharaja Sahab Vilas Sinhji Bahadur of Suvarnapur. Report to the nearest police-station, or take the child, dead or alive, to her father for royal burial or breeding.'

I folded the paper, put it inside the hollow of an oblong round tiny copper holder, and closed it with its copper lid. Then attaching a tough black string to the holder in the form of a neck-chain, I put it round the neck of the child. After washing the child, I placed her in an open soft-cushioned cane-basket and covered her with a piece of white linen. I put the basket on my head and proceeded to the railway station. It was pitch dark at midnight. The kerosine lamps of the station were dimly burning. There I saw that a goods train was about to depart. I stealthily approached an open wagon, mounted it and placing the basket in its midst, hurriedly dismounted from the wagon and walked away. While I was leaving the station yard, I heard the whistle of the engine, looked back and saw that the goods train had started. Thus I left the poor baby to her fate and to the mercy of Providence. I didn't expect that the tender thing would survive the cold blasts of the wind that was then furiously blowing.

About a month thereafter, when Jumna was able to move about, I sent her away to my mother at Chandipur, because after her delivery, she had caught up a slow septic fever. The fever never left her and ultimately developed into a crisis. She expired at Chandipur after six months of consuming suffering, a victim to my desire for lucre and to the royal desire for lust.

CHAPTER XIII

Development of a Morbid Habit

About a month after I had sent away Jumna to Chandipur, I was busy with the confinement-work of Kamalaba. She had given birth to a daughter. It was during the period of her confinement that one day early morning, Halima came to my quarters. I remember it was the same day on which the name of Vijaya-Kumari was conferred on the newly born daughter of Kamalaba.

I was a little surprized, as Halima rarely came to my place. I saw that she had been seized with some kind of terror.

‘What’s the matter?’ I asked her.

‘I am much perplexed,’ she stated. ‘Huzur is mightily angry with me and Sidik. We have incurred his displeasure and I am afraid we shall be dismissed from service.’

At her mention of Sidik, I got frightened for myself.

‘Has he come to know that Sidik and I use Vilasbag for our private purposes?’ I nervously questioned her.

‘No It’s not that,’ she said to my relief, and continued, ‘Huzur, of late, has been drinking very much, and now he is exhibiting a very morbid tendency. I think his potency is well-nigh exhausted. It can’t be helped when one, howsoever strong and virile, dissipates himself after wine and womanising. He has been leading this kind of dissolute life last eight years, and no wonder, if impotency results. But I can’t understand the symptoms he manifested last night. Yesterday I sent for a niece of mine. She is my deceased elder sister’s daughter. Her old father is very poor and resides in a village nearly. I wanted her to earn some money for herself, and so at my invitation she came to my place last evening. I wrote a private note to Huzur at the palace to the effect that I had got a fresh bird for him and that I had fixed up Rs. 100 as the remuneration I had an honest idea of making my niece earn that amount, so poor she is. So Huzur came to Vilasbag. I taught my niece, an uninitiated virgin as she was, how to behave with him and after bathing and dressing her, I took her upstairs to the terrace. She is a fairly good-looking girl of 16. When I took her to him, I found that he was heavily drunk and noisily prattling. I never saw him in such a delirium before. On seeing

me and the girl, he shouted, 'Halima! Send up Sidik at once. I command you. I want him to caress this bird. Yes I do want him to caress this 'fresh' bird as you say she is.'

I was indeed taken aback, and remonstrated.

'Ji Huzur! I am but your slave ready to obey your commands. But Huzur! This girl is my niece and Sidik is her brother!'

'Never mind,' he vociferated, 'a brother or a sister! Don't bother me, you she-donkey! Go and send up Sidik. I command you.'

I was all along trembling while he was vociferously shouting. In sheer fright I ran downstairs and once tumbled on the staircase. My knee was sprained. I breathlessly talked the whole thing to Sidik. He went up and immediately brought down my niece. Since then, he has been howling abuses at me and Sidik. And now we are awaiting his order of dismissal. What shall I do? Show me some way out of it.'

I reflected for a while over this narration of a curious episode by Halima. I decided, my turn had now come to satisfy my long-cherished grudge.

'Halimabai! You do one thing first,' I suggested. 'Go and tell Huzur at once, before he passes orders of dismissal, that you have found out a

bird who is not related to Sidik and who therefore won't object to being caressed by him and that you have arranged to bring it to-night. I think, your telling him this will allay his wrath, and God willing, he won't dismiss you or Sidik. Take heart and go.'

x x x x x

On my arrival at Vilasbag that night, I requested Halima to go upstairs to enquire and report about his state of drunkenness, and she reported to me that he was busy with his glasses and getting nearer to yesterday's volume of intoxication. I then dressed myself with a thickly-textured chirmin silk saree and veiled my face in order to prevent my identification. I gave certain instructions to Halima and accompanied her to the terrace. Ushering me into the royal bed-room, Halima said,

'Ji Huzur ! Here is a fresh bird for you.'

I stood there in the familiar bed-room with my face veiled, and through the veil I saw that his eyes had become yellow with jaundice.

'Yes, that's right, I thank you, Halima !' He laughed.

'Ha ! Ha, Ha ! A fresh bird ! Isn't it ? Alright. Alright. Send Sidik up, and let me see how he...'

'Don't go Halimabai !' I immediately interrupted,

'I have not come here for Sidik. I have come here for Maharaja Sahab. I won't misbehave with a servant! That's certain. And I don't want any money from Maharaja Sahab. I love him for his own sake,' I addressed to Halima.

'Oh! You love me!' 'Huzur ejaculated. 'That's right. That's right. I am glad, so very glad that you love me. Yes, you do love me. But what's the harm if Sidik loves you in my place, eh? what's the harm?'

'Halimabai! Tell Maharaja Sahab that if he wants me to misbehave with his servant, he shall have to pay a big price. I loathe to misbehave with servants. Maharaja saheb himself is a different thing.' I was all along addressing Halima.

'What price?' exclaimed Huzur. 'Name the price and it will be yours.'

'Rupees ten thousand and I shall be satisfied,' I said.

'That's alright. That's alright. Halima! Give this fresh bird ten thousand, here and now, and send Sidik,' Huzur ordered.

Halima went downstairs to bring money and Sidik.

I said to Huzur, 'I won't stay with this servant of yours any longer than is necessary. I have already said that I hate to misbehave with

servants, but I am unwillingly compelled to do so in obedience to your command. I will go away as soon as my business is over.'

'That's alright,' he vociferated.

Halima came and handed over to me a thick bundle of notes.

On Sidik's arrival, Huzur asked me to draw aside my veil and let him see my face.

'Ji Huzur ! I am not a fresh bird as you suppose. I am an old bird, Ganga ! Do you recognize me ?'
I said to Huzur, drawing aside my veil.

Huzur stared at me, bewildered. Then he vociferated, 'I dont won't any one here who is not a fresh bird. Get away, you stupid old bird ! I have no use of your scattered feathers. Get away or I shall thrash you.'

I ran downstairs with my bundle of notes, followed by Sidik. Out of my earnings, I gave Rs 300 to Sidik, Rs. 100 to Halima and Rs. 100 to Hava. Halima patted my back, and kissing me on the forehead said, 'You are a clever girl.'

CHAPTER XIV

Drama in Satiation of a Morbid Habit

Next noon, when I returned from my duty at the palace, I saw Halima seated in my house and waiting for me. She informed me that Huzur was sober in the morning, when she went to serve him his breakfast, but he was in a fury.

‘Halima ! Why did you bring that old bird Ganga ? She was of no use to me,’ he shouted to me.

‘Ji Huzur !’ I replied, ‘ She was the only bird I could find, who would not object to Sidik if she would be paid money for it, and that’s why I brought her. I couldn’t find any other consenting bird in the city.’

‘No ! That won’t do. Find out an absolutely fresh bird. Never mind what it costs. That’s my command. I crave to see a fresh bird caressed by my chauffeur.’ So I have come to tell you all this. How is it possible for me to find out a virgin and that too,

one who can satisfy his morbid curiosity? It is an impossible task for me.'

'Where is your niece of the village?' I asked her.

'She has gone back to her place, empty-handed.'

'Can you send for her again?'

'Yes, if you want her. But what for?'

'I'll tell you afterwards. For the present you simply tell Huzur that you have found out a bold couple. If I succeed in my plan, I shall make your niece earn Rs. 500 at one stroke. If he commands you to bring the couple to his presence, intimate to me, and I shall do the needful.' Halima kissed my hand and went away.

Now I had become convinced that the development of this morbid curiosity was brought about by a condition of mind which had become depraved with excessive drinking and dissolute with indiscriminate dabauchery. A persistent course of a fast life had entirely unnerved him, and now to restore his lost nerves to a pitch of excitement any how, he was craving for an unseemly sight, with his obsession for fresh birds still continuing. These were my conclusions. I wanted to take full advantage of the present state of his mind and nerves, and to rob him as much as I could whilst the oppor-

tunity lasted, and so to retaliate myself for the great injustice he had done to my sister.

Next morning, Halima came to me, and it was not without my expectation.

'Huzur has commanded me to bring the couple to-night at Vilasbag,' she said.

'You please bring your niece to-day. I shall appear in a man's garb and your niece shall be my wife for the time being. What else can we do?' I said to her.

She got startled at the strangeness of my suggestion.

'Halimabai!' I encouraged her, 'don't be afraid. No harm will come to your niece or to you. I shall see to it. Trust me. I am quite hopeful that I shall go through the whole show. I shall dexterously manage it from top to bottom. So bring your niece to me here first, and I shall train her how to behave with her temporary husband in the royal presence.'

The same evening, Halima brought her niece to my place. She was an ordinary village girl, but she had a robust constitution of an Arab woman. Her complexion was wheatish though bordering on the dark and her features were plain, that is, neither handsome nor ugly. She looked intelligent from the manner of her conversation with me. Her name was Fatma.

‘Look here, Fatmabai!’ I said to her, ‘we are going to play a drama tonight for the part of your husband and you will act the part of my wife. You see that I am a woman just as you are. Therefore don’t apprehend anything. Be bold and brave. We are going to make a mere show of husband and wife. I promise you Rs. 500, if you will act your role well.’

I then taught her carefully the part I wanted her to act in the royal presence and instructed her how to understand and follow my signals and gestures. She was, unlike my sister, mature of understanding and theoretically conversant with the ways of woman with man. So she made my instructions easier, and chances of detection mitigated.

That night, I was dressed up in my husband Nathu’s attire, I put on a surwal (close pants) and a long coat buttoned up to the neck. A large turban covered my luxuriant hair. I wore an artificial moustache.

When I arrived at Vilasbag, I saw that Halima had kept Fatma all ready, bathed up and dressed up in the usual transparent sparkling silken suit. She now looked quite attractive and charming. I wished I had really been a male. I felt that I would really enjoy the embraces of her fully rounded contours, as if I were a male. Halima had taken particular

pains to comb her glossy black hair and rouge her plain face in such a fashion that she resembled an artificially beautified actress. So fragrant and fresh she looked that I got enamoured of her, and was eager to play the role of her husband.

We then went up to the terrace. Halima, as usual, ushered Fatma and me in to the intoxicated king's presence, and said, 'Ji Huzur, I have brought this fresh couple according to your command.' At my signal, Halima retired. Fatma stood on my left side with her face veiled with broad golden netted border of her saree in the manner of a newly wedded bride. On seeing us, he stopped sipping and placed down his glass.

'Is she your wife or mistress?' pointing out to Fatma, he asked me.

'Ji Huzur, she is my wife,' I thickened my throat and said.

'How long is she your wife?' he enquired.

'Ji Huzur! I brought her home only to-day. She is my newly wedded wife.'

'Then it is your first honey-moon night with her?'

'Ji Huzur. It is so.'

'Oh! I see. Then she is yet quite a fresh bird. Oh! I didn't expect that. I am so glad. Do you

know, man, I am extremely fond of fresh birds? Yes. Fresh birds are a hobby with me. I only take to fresh birds with unscattered feathers. I discard those with scattered feathers. But how did you, so fresh a couple, happen to be brought here, may I know?'

'Ji Huzur! Halimabai saw the bridal procession passing on the road. She followed it, called me in private and told me about your kind command that you desired our first honey-moon night to be spent at Vilasbag. She told me that Huzursaheb was so generous a man that he won't mind giving a very liberal dowry to my bride. That's why we are here.'

'How much dowry do you expect?' He asked me.

'At least twenty-five thousand, because my bride is, as you say, a fresh bird with unscattered feathers,' I put in.

'Press that button.'

I pressed the bell and Halima came out to answer it.

'Halima! Give this bridegroom 25 thousand I want to give a good dowry for his fresh bride'

Halima brought 25 notes of a thousand each, and

handed them to me. I carefully placed the notes in the inside pocket of my achkan coat.

‘Now, my beautiful bird!’ Huzur addressed Fatma.

‘Throw off your veil and let me see your charming face. That’s right. You are so very considerate. I am so glad that you are quite a fresh bird.’

At my signal, after she threw off her veil, Fatma approached Huzur, filled up a glass and holding it to his lips said, ‘Ji Huzur! Please take this glass in celebration of our honey-moon.’ He took off the raw tumblerful of whisky at a stretch.

‘Oh! Then this is your first honey-moon with your man. Isn’t it so, my beautiful fresh bird?’ he stammered to Fatma.

Fatma filled up another glass at my signal. ‘Ji Huzur! Take one glass more,’ said she, kissing him on the cheek.

‘Oh! My fresh bird! I can’t say ‘no’ to you. You are so sweetly kissing me.’ He swallowed up that other glass as well and soon lay stretched on the ottoman into a heavy torpor.

I drew Fatma to my breast and folding her tightly in my arms kissed her on the cheeks, for she had played her part to my entire satisfaction. We waited there for two or three hours, lest Huzur

might rise up from his torpor, but he did not get up and was throughout unconscious. Early dawn, we went downstairs. I gave one note of a thousand to Halima to be equally divided between Fatma and herself. I awakened Sidik who was sleeping in the verandah and motored down home. I changed my dress, became a woman again and went to bed.

CHAPTER XV

Perils of Fast Life

Naturally, I woke up late. It was almost noon. I hurried up to the palace on confinement duties.

There I was surprized to find the whole palace in a great uproar. Attendants, servants and secretaries were running hither and thither. I met my husband and asked him what it was all about.

‘Huzur Sahab is seriously ill,’ he nervously replied, ‘He is just brought here in an ambulance from Vilasbag. He is still unconscious. Doctors have come. They say there is an abscess in his liver, and he is suffering from blood-pressure. They say that’s due to overdrinking.’

I was in a terror and couldn’t utter a word with guilty conscience. With a throbbing heart I resumed my duties of sweeping Kamalaba’s rooms, and to all outward appearances kept up a face as if nothing extraordinary had happened.

Huzur did not recover his senses until late in the evening. In the meanwhile cart-loads of ice had come to the palace. I perfectly knew that my signals to Fatma were responsible for this hubbub. Repentence seized hold of me. I heaved a great sigh of relief when Nathu came to me and said :

‘He is in senses now. He has opened his eyes, but yet does not recognise people.’

I couldn't sleep peacefully that night. Dangers of over-drinking stared me in the face and from that night onward, I entirely stopped giving any beverage whatsoever to my husband Nathu.

Weeks of anxiety passed. Huzursahab was still seriously ill, though doctors had declared that he was out of danger. I heard palace people talking that Sarkar had ordered Maharaja Sahab to be taken to Bombay for treatment. That night, I asked Nathu about it.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘doctors advise that he must give up drinking for all time to come. Otherwise, he will get from bad to worse. They say that abscess of liver is a dangerous disease; and the abscess is so enlarged that it will take years before he completely recovers, provided he doesn't take a drop of wine. Our burra doctor (chief medical officer) informed Sarkar and it has been ordered by Sarkar that he is to be taken to Bombay and treated there by European doctors under

the supervision of Bombay Governor. Huzur told me that he was taking Kamalaba and children with him.'

Next morning, I asked Kamalaba about it. 'I hear, you are all going to Bombay,' said I.

'Yes, that's so, she replied 'We are going soon. Sarkar has arranged all about it, At Bombay, I hope, Huzur will surely recover.'

'They say that all this trouble is due to his taking wine,' I ventured to ask. 'How is't, Basaheb, that you allowed him to drink so much?'

'No, I never allowed him to drink at all in my presence. Elsewhere I was helpless,' she regretfully said. 'He used to go to Vilasbag, and there drink secretly from me. Once, I rebuked him severely, but he felt offended and threatened that he would marry a second Ranee who would not only not object but would drink with him. I was silenced. What could I do? He is a Maharaja and who can prevent him from marrying again? So, I was helpless and now he is so seriously ill.' And Kamalaba began to weep.

'When you will go away to Bombay, what shall I do here?' I asked her in order to divert her mind from sorrow. 'Doctors say you shall have to stay there for a very long time.'

She wiped her tears and said, 'Ganga! I shall hand over to you the keys of all my rooms before I go. See that they are being kept neat and clean. Take care that no article is lost in my absence. I know that you are a loyal and affectionate maid.'

A week later, I wept when I saw Huzur being borne away on a stretcher to the ambulance car. All the palace people surrounded the car. He saw me and smiled, and gave me a tip of ten rupees along with other servants of the palace. Doctors did not allow any servant of the Huzur except Sidik, the chauffeur, because each one of them was suspected to be in the drinking habit. Sidik was taken, because the Rolls-royce had already been booked to Bombay for the use of the royal family.

CHAPTER XVI

Irresistible Maternal Urge

After the departure of Sidik, life looked tedious to me. For a time I felt that there was no fun in life without him. It took me a long time before I got round from pangs of separation and resigned myself to the new circumstances. Sidik being beyond reach and unavailable, I gradually turned my attention to my husband Nathu, because he was the only object of interest left for me. I had seen with my own eyes the awful consequences of habitual drinking. I did not want to reduce my husband to that terrible strait. I began studiously to keep an eye on him to see to it that he abstained from drinking elsewhere. I had already stopped my folly of serving him drinks to suit my own nefarious purposes. I was now sincerely repenting that folly. I promised Nathu that if he gave up drinks altogether, I would behave as a real wife to him and love him and ungrudgingly give him every possible enjoyment that he demanded of me.

He was highly pleased with my proposal and promised me in return that he would not touch wine. I began to give him enervating wholesome food. Now that the palace kitchen had been closed, I prepared with my own hands meals for him morning and evening, and took care to see that he was well-fed with milk and butter. Now that I had got ample private purse of over thirty-five thousand rupees, I purchased two milch buffaloes so that my husband would get pure unadulterated well-nourishing milk. Gradually he fattened in body and I grew fonder of him. Thus we were passing our happy time together as a normal couple. For the next ten years my life ran its even course with nothing in particular happening, that would be worth mentioning in these my memoirs. Huzur Saheb had not yet totally recovered. Sidik was off and on writing to me that there was very slow improvement in his malady, and he was yet in a convalescent stage.

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I was now 30 years of age and at the top of mature womanhood. I can't say why and how, but one night a strong and irresistible desire to have a child sprang within me, so that I could fondle a playful kid and pass my days in rearing and bringing it up I regretted that there was none from Nathu. Sidik's daughter I had already lost and suddenly Huzur's son, my first-born child, was

brought to my memory. I calculated that if he were living, he would now be 14 years old. While I was lying on my bed that night with Nathu by my side, an irresistible urge to have my 14 years old boy back to me and to fondle him, overpowered my whole being. I felt that my whole soul wanted to reach out for him. A craving arose within my breast to suckle him. The more I thought of him, the more I craved for him. And now I positively worried to find out whether he was living or dead. If dead, when he died, where he died and how he died. If living, where he was and what he was doing. I grew extremely anxious to know whether he was well-fed or starving and whether he was taking buffalo's milk or cow's milk or no milk at all. Who was there to see what kind of milk he was taking? Who was there to care if he got milk at all? Here I was daily milking my buffaloes to nourish my husband and there, the son of my own blood whom I had nourished within my own body for nine long months, was perhaps going on without milk at all. The very idea of his going on without milk split my heart. And again, who was there to see what kind of food he ate or what kind of bed he slept? Was he clothed or naked? Was he going to school or labouring as a coolie or begging in the street? Was he happy or miserable? Was he laughing or weeping? Such questions arose in my mind like an avalanche, and

placed me into a terrible state of suspense, with regard to the well-being of my son. I was overwhelmed by the helplessness of my boy's condition. No father, no mother to look after him. None to care for him seriously or sincerely. Bitterest pangs of separation from my boy struck my heart like strokes of lightning, and unable to bear them, I wept bitterly drenching my pillow with a torrent of tears running down my eyes.

Next morning I wrote the following letter :

CONFIDENTIAL

To

The Superintendent,

The Hindu Orphanage, Nadiad.

Sir,

I left my 30 days old son in the foundling-box of your orphanage on the midnight of 26th November 1916. There is a cross-mark on his right wrist I am yearning to know all about him. I shall remain under a deep debt of gratitude to you, Sir ! if you will be kind enough to furnish me with all information about him by return post.

C/o. Palace, Suvarnapur
9-11-30

Yours faithfully,
Gangabai

It was only after posting this letter that my restlessly choked-up heart got some relief. Four days later, when the postman delivered to me an envelope with the name of the orphanage printed on it, I pressed it

to my bosom and kissed it as if I was pressing and kissing my 14 years old boy. I hid the envelope on my breast underneath my bodice, and my heart began to heave with alternate feelings of joy and suspense. I at once hastened to kamalaba's bed-room in the palace, closed the door and seated there on the cot, tore open the envelope.

Shrimati Gangabal,

In reply to your enquiry dated 9-11-30 I have the honour to enclose herewith, for your information, a copy of entries as noted in our registers in respect of child No 116 dated 27-11-1916.

Hindu Orphanage,
Nadiad, 11-11-30

Yours faithfully,
Illegible
Spdt.

The copy ran as follows:-

Child No. 116	
Date	Particulars
27-11-16	Found in F. B. at 2-5 a.m.
	Sex — Male.
	Age — about a month.
	Name — Deepak.
	Weight — 6 lbs.
	Colour — White
	Identification mark:— A mole on the left cheek. The wrist of the right hand swollen due to a cross-cut frozen with blood. Non-congenital.

Nurse—in—charge:—Ramabai.

29-11-16 Injury cured. Cross-cut apparent on the wrist.

2-1-22 Sent to Vernacular school.

10-11-25 Sent to Middle School.

9-11-28 Passed st. III. Stood 1st.

Awarded Rs. 10 prize.

Won 3 prizes—dialogues and recitation.

2-1-29 Sent to High School.

25-10-29 Passed st. IV. Stood 1 st.

Awarded Rs. 20 prize.

Won a prize—Music.

8-11-30 Being Saturday, went to School in the morning. Not returned.

9-11-30 Police informed. Attended school yesterday. Was seen proceeding on foot to railway station about 11-30 a. m. Not traced. MISSING

Last measurement

1-1-30 Height - 4"-10"

Chest - 30"

Waist - 24"

Weight - 90 lbs.

Appearance - Tall, Stout.

Personal Property—

Cash Rs. 50/- collected in prizes. Not found in his box. Missing.

After reading the word "Missing," my heart sank. Tears flowed and fell on the ominous paper and soaked it. I couldn't console myself. It was on the very day my heart was drawn out to him and craved to possess

him that he had left the orphanage ! Seen proceeding to the railway station all alone. All alone and all trace lost. My head began to reel, the bed-room began to swim, the bed began to whirl in a merry-go-round and I dropped senseless on the floor. I don't know how long I remained in swoon but on recovering from it, I re-read the copy. What a 'coincidence' that he was missing the very night I had the urge to have him ! Why did I not inquire {only a week before ! Then perhaps I would not have missed him. I was in a rage with myself and furiously slapped my own face. The thought that he had left no trace behind and disappeared beyond reach left a deep wound in my heart. Where could he have gone ? My boy ! Only 14 years of age ! Murdered ? Lost for ever ? No chance to see his face ? My heart was lacerated. I wept and sobbed myself to exhaustion, a helpless mother.

Now I lost all joy of living. I was turned into merely a human machine, automatically, breathing life for want of death. Without my boy, I felt that life was not worth living. In this way, five years passed in their placid and lifeless course. Father Time is a great healer of all sores and wounds of the heart and in time my heart was healed of its obsession. And my mind reverted to its normal condition. What mother does not get normal by five years after the loss of her dearest son ?

CHAPTER XVII

An Extraordinary Affair

As I have stated in my last chapter, nothing noteworthy occurred during last five years except that Halima died in her quarters at Vilasbag at the ripe old age of 75. By now, life had lost all joy for me before it revived once again when, one morning, I saw that the palace was in a bustle. Nathu informed me that there was a telegram from Bombay and the royal family was to arrive that evening. I remember the day because it preceded the Dashera holiday of the year 1936. There was a great activity in the hitherto vacant palace. I carefully swept Kamalaba's rooms and cleansed and dusted all articles of the furniture and kept everything ready for her reception.

The Bombay party arrived. Huzursaheb had totally recovered and now looked hale and hearty and in full vigour of health, though there were some dim wrinkles in his face over his now thickly set black moustaches. Kamalaba had fattened and now looked a serious elderly lady. Heir-apparent Vijaysinh had

developed into a fine robust handsome youth of about 21 years of age, active and agile and freely talking with everybody he met in a sweet charming amiable manner. He saw me and jocularly said, 'Hullo ! Gangabai ! How are you ? You still look as young as you were when I was a child and beating you.' Princess Vijayakumari also had developed into a charming young maiden of about 16 years of age, with a commanding profile which indicated that she had fully matured into womanhood. She looked a sweet, innocent angel.

Kamalaba inspected her rooms and was pleased with their neat appearance. She said to me, Ganga ! You have well looked after my rooms. I am pleased. Take this.' She gave me a tip of fifty rupees.

Next day was Dashera holiday. In the morning, I was dusting the furniture of Kamalaba's bedroom. She had just returned from her worship-room, when Huzur came there. He looked at me, smiled, twitched his eye at me and addressed Kamalaba :

'Kamla ! I desire to engage this Ganga at Vilasbag, if you let her. You know Halima is dead and there is nobody to look after the bungalow. Hava is there but she is now too old to do any work. There is a lot of valuable furniture, precious pictures, crockery and what

not. I can't find any trustworthy person to whom these things can be safely entrusted. What do you pay Ganga ?'

'Fifteen rupees a month.'

'I'll pay her thirty rupees. Let her earn that much. She is a faithful servant. She deserves that much promotion.'

'Yes. Let her be transferred there. I don't mind,' Kamalaba agreed.

'In a way it's good that you are being engaged at Vilasbag,' Kamalaba remarked to me after the Huzur's departure

I got startled. A sense of shame covered my face.

'How ?' I impatiently asked and got nervous.

'If you are there,' she replied, 'you will be able to watch him. For God's sake see that he doesn't revert to his old habit of drinking. All these fifteen years in Bombay, Sarkar's European doctor didn't allow him a drop. He was a very strict doctor. We used to pay him Rs. 1500 a month for watching Huzur all the 24 hours. So Huzur couldn't drink at all. Now that there is no European doctor here and our native doctors here in service are all flatterers, I am afraid he might renew his craving for his old habit. So you must watch him, and if

you suspect it, inform me privately at once.' Saying so, she made me a second tip of a hundred rupees.

That noon, I informed my husband Nathu that Huzur had been pleased to appoint me in Halima's place at Vilasbag at Rs. 30 a month, and that therefore I was shifting there. His face became sullen at the news of my transfer. But he couldn't say anything, because it was Huzur who had ordered the transfer.

'You'll have no difficulty of food, now that the palace kitchen is open, and I shall be visiting you off and on,' I comforted him.

While I was thus talking with my husband, I was called away to the royal presence.

'Ganga ! I have called to give you some necessary instructions, now that you are in charge of Vilasbag,' Huzur said to me as soon as I entered his drawing room. 'Here are ten thousand for the present. Keep the notes in Halima's safe and maintain an account. You can spend from this money while discharging your duties under my orders. Keep all detailed accounts of expenditure just as Halima used to keep, and place them for my inspection on every first day of the month. Then,

what next ! Yes. Do you know miss Seeta, the the Head-Mistress of the Girls' High School? Have you ever seen her, Ganga?

'Yes. No, no ! I don't remember to have ever seen her. I don't know her,' bewildered, I faltered.

'No ? Halima knew her. She brought me fresh birds very often. She resides on the top-floor of the Boarding-house of her school. You go to her just now and tell her to find out a fresh bird for me tonight, now that I have come from Bombay. I thank God that I have been relieved of that damned Bombay life. It was a wretched life. That European doctor was so stupid that he gave me no time for enjoyment ! I was, as it were, in a jail with simple imprisonment ! Thank God ! I am now quite free to follow my own inclinations. So, you tell Seeta that she will get a thousand rupees, as she used to get before. You can go now and let me know what she says, so that I can arrange my programme accordingly.'

I hired a carriage and went to see Seetabai. The school was closed that day on account of the holiday and so I found her seated alone in her room on the top-floor of the Boarding-house.

I stood on the threshold and said, 'I am coming from Huznrsahab.'

'Yes, yes,' she ejaculated, 'come in, come in. Take your seat.'

I got seated on an armless wooden chair and continued, 'I have been recently appointed as Supervisor of Vilasbag in place of late Halimabai whom, I think, you probably knew. Huzursaheb arrived yesterday from Bombay...'

'Yes, yes. I know it. How is he?' She inquired.
'Quite O. K.'

'Oh! Thank God, he has recovered from such a long long sickness. It took him 15 long years to recover! Think of that! God, in His mercy, has saved such a kind and liberal Rajah. What do you say? Is he not kind and liberal?' She was getting garrulous.

'Yes. He is so kind and liberal. He has commanded me to ask you to find out a fresh bird for to-night, if you possibly can,' I came to business.

'Oh! I see. Yes. Request him on my behalf that I have already a fresh bird in hand and I will bring it tonight,' she eagerly replied.

'Thanks. I forgot to tell you one thing. Your remuneration shall be the same as before, a thousand.'

'That doesn't matter. That's O. K. then.'

I then left the boarding-house and went straight back to the palace to inform Huzur of the talk I had with Seetabai, and from there I proceeded to Vilasbag to take over my new duties.

It being Dashera holiday, a procession was to start for sword-worship from the palace, according to the royal custom. Some time after I had arrived at Vilasbag, the sword-worship procession came there. Huzur saheb and Maharaj Kumar (Heir-apparent) were seated in a silver-carriage and four. I saw a handsome young man, seated opposite to them in the carriage. I was impressed by his striking appearance and so I asked Hava who was watching the procession with me :

‘Who is that tall robust young man, sitting opposite?’

‘I don’t know. I guess he is a guest from Bombay,’ Hava surmised.

‘Yes. He appears to be a Bombay man,’ I agreed.

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That night, Huzur came to Vilasbag a little earlier.

‘Have they come?’ he impatiently asked me.

‘Not yet, Ji Huzur!’

‘Dress the fresh bird soon, and send them up. But how old is the fresh bird? Did you see it? It is beautiful?’

'Ji Huzur ! I have not seen it. Nor had I any talk with Seetabai about the bird, '

'That's alright. Doesn't matter.' Saying so, he went upstairs.

After a while, Seetabai arrived with the bird. I thought it was really a swan-bird. The girl's complexion was moon-like blonde, so white and symmetrically round it was. She was rather delicate in physique, slender at the waist and in the full glory of her youth. She wore gold-rimmed spectacles over her long eyelashes and beautiful black eyes. She looked like a fairy even in her simple attire of a white black-bordered linen saree. Instinctively, I felt so much interest in this beautiful fairy that an automatic desire sprang within my bosom to draw her to myself and know all about her from Seetabai. So I instructed Hava to get her ready for her upstairs visit.

'What class is she in ?' I asked Seetabai.

'6th standard. Next year she will be promoted to the Matric class. She is a clever student, but so docile and obedient. I like her the best of all my pupils.'

'What's her name ?'

'Bhagirathi.'

'Where does she come from ?'

.. 'She comes.....'

The bell furiously rang and I hurried upstairs to the terrace without finishing the talk. Huzur was pacing about restlessly, like a lion eager to devour its prey, in the royal bed-room.

'Have they come?'

'Ji Huzur.'

'Then what are they doing? What's the delay?'

'Ji Huzur! Hava is dressing the bird.'

'How do you find her?'

'Ji Huzur! I have not seen the like of her in my life. Even in her cheap attire, she looks a fairy. To speak for myself, I am charmed by her. Had I been a man, I would have loved her at first sight.'

'Is't so? That's alright then. Send them up at once. I am so impatient to see the fresh bird. Let me see if I can love her at first sight.'

I went downstairs. By the time, Bhagirathi was ready. Seetabai took her upstairs.

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The bell rang. I went up the terrace. Huzur, seated on an ottoman was preparing gold-leaf-covered pans. The two women were standing in the central part of the bed-room, awaiting his orders.

'Ganga ! Take miss Seeta down and give her double her remuneration, two thousand. She deserves it for bringing such a beautiful fresh bird. Also give two thousand to the bird, when she comes down.'

Seetabai came downstairs with me. I opened the safe and gave her the two thousand. I was reminded of my mother, when she was counting the notes.

'Many thanks,' she said. 'Now what shall we do to kill time until Bhagirathi comes down ? What do you suggest, Gangabai ! I remember, Halimabai used to prepare tea and we always took tea together.'

I went to the tea-room and was about to ignite the stove, when the bell roared.

'Seetabai, will you please prepare tea in the meantime ? The bell is ringing. I must go upstairs.'

Saying so, I hurried upstairs. Huzur was standing by the stair-case in the terrace.

'Is miss Seeta there downstairs ?'

'Ji Hnzur.'

'Send her up at once.'

Seetabai had just placed a kettle on the ignited stove when I informed her that she was wanted by the Huzur. She went upstairs and about ten minutes later,

returned, accompanied by Bhagirathi. I was astonished, and enquiringly looked at Seetabai.

‘Huzursaheb says he doesn’t want her. He ordered me to take her away back to the boarding-house. He says he wants to engage her at the palace as a companion to Vijaya Kumariba saheb and he is going to make all arrangements about it.’

Hava brought cups of tea for us, and after finishing tea, Seetabai and Bhagirathi left us for the boarding-house.

‘Havabai ! This is a very extraordinary affair. I can’t understand why Huzur should dismiss the girl so soon,’ I invited her opinion in the matter.

‘You don’t know it, but I am sure that he has not regained his manhood, though he has recovered his health. He has dismissed the girl in sheer disappointment,’ Hava commented.

‘That’s alright, but why should he engage her as Vijayaba’s companion ? How do you explain that ?’ I tried to draw her out on the other problem.

‘I guess he has done so to close her mouth. With such an honourable post, she could not be expected to divulge his failure at today’s nocturnal adventure. Now she cannot run him down before

anybody. I think that's Huzur's object in appointing her as a companion.

The bell rang in a shaking manner. I went up. Huzur was pacing to and fro, with his arms folded on the back as if he was in some agitated condition of mind.

'Look here, Ganga! From tomorrow, I am not coming here any more. Close the bungalow. You go to the palace and resume your old duties with Kamala. What's the balance of money I gave you this noon? Bring it.'

Downstairs from the safe, I brought the balance.

'Ji Huzur! I have given Seetabai two thousand as per orders. Here is the balance, eight thousand.'

He put the balance in his pocket without counting it.

CHAPTER XVIII

Irony of Fate

Next morning, I informed Kamalaba of Huzur's order to resume my services with her. She said, 'yes, Huzur told me so last night.' Then I went to sweep Kamalaba's drawing-room. There, to my wonder, I saw the same tall handsome young man whom I had seen in the carriage of the Dashera procession. Maharaj Kumar and Vijayaba were seated on a sofa and he, seated on the carpet, was playing on a harmonium and singing to the tunes. Though I began to dust the furniture, I could not break away from his sweet melody. I was as charmed with his melodious voice as with his strikingly athletic and manly form. I was rapt in ecstasies by his musical tune and my whole body vibrated when once his eyes met mine. My heart was thrilled to the core. I felt I was in an elysium. I was possessed with an irresistible impulse to capture him if I could, and to make him wholly mine.

That morning, losing my head, I finished my duties in a confused manner, and hurriedly went home,

so anxious I was to learn all about the antecedents of this Bombay man. I called Sidik at once.

Sidik had now grown very fat. He was from his youth short of stature, and now due to his excessive fat, looked an ugly dwarf with his hemispherically bulging belly. If one saw him coming from a distance, he could easily be mistaken for a bear with his dark shaggy body.

First of all, I wanted to humour Sidik in order to eke out a full story of the Bombay man.

‘What were you doing in Bombay, all these fifteen years? Were you ever remembering me?’

‘I was dying for you. I had all along been expecting a call from you, since my arrival here. I am glad that you have not forgotten me and my love for you. Now when are we going to meet, and where?’

‘You have grown too fat for me. I would get crushed,’ I laughingly said, and encouraged, ‘yet I will see to it.’ He expressed his satisfaction by kissing my hand.

‘Did you learn anything from Seetabai about that girl she brought last night to Vilasbag?’ I questioned him. ‘Did she say anything to you, while you were driving them back to the boarding-house?’

‘No. She was mum.’

‘Did the girl say anything to Seetabai within your hearing ?’

‘No. She was also quiet.’

‘Who is that guest who has come from Bombay with you ?’

‘He is not a guest.’

‘Then who is he ?’

‘He is the music-teacher to Vijayaba.’

‘On what pay ?’

‘Rs. 300 a month.’

‘Who engaged him ?’

‘Huzur Sahab.’

‘How did he happen to meet Huzur Sahab ?’

‘A fortnight before we left Bombay, we had all been to see a picture. There he was acting as a hero. Vijayaba was highly pleased with his acting and singing. She wanted to hear him sing in person. So she requested Huzur to call him. Huzur ordered me to fetch him. I went to his studio and brought him. The Sarkar’s European doctor so much liked his singing to the tunes of the harmonium which he played so dexterously that it was he who

pressed Huzur to engage him as the music master to Vijayaba, because she was a pet child of the doctor. He was getting Rs. 200 at the studio. First he refused to leave off his cinema service, but Vijayaba persuaded him. So he left, and came to reside with us at Bombay. Now he has come here with us.'

'Has he been given separate quarters here?'

'Yes. He is your neighbour. Just there! Two rooms and verandah have been allotted to him,' said he, pointing the house.

'Has he brought his family here?'

'No He is a bachelor. He is all alone.'

'Where does he take his food?'

'The evening we arrived here, Vijayaba pressed him to take his food at the palace, but he wouldn't. He dines at his own quarters.'

'Who cooks for him?'

'He is his own cook.'

'What's his name?'

'His cinema name is Roshan, and we all know him by that name.'

I was satisfied by the information Sidik gave me.

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That night I saw Roshan passing by my house to his own. On seeing him, again a wild thrill of ecstasy passed through the whole frame of mine. I had never experienced such a sweet sensation before. It was all novel to me. My heart couldn't bear the thrill. My feet were giving way, and so I lay down on my bed.

Hours passed. It was midnight and yet I couldn't get a wink of sleep. I was wide awake. His fascinating looks, his melodious voice, his manly beauty, his harmonium, his dexterously playing fingers and all that concerned him were haunting me. I was all alone in the house. Nathu had gone to sleep at the palace as Huzur was there. I was aware that Roshan, too, was all alone in his house. At midnight, nobody was likely to watch him and me together. All the circumstances were favourable. I could not resist the overpowering temptation. With a determination to make him a slave of my charms I got up from my bed. I wanted to appear before him like a siren from the seas. I took out from my suitcase the dazzling silken garments and jewelled ornaments. I dressed my hair with sweetly perfumed hair oil, sprinkled scented lavender on my garments and handkerchief and made them aromatic. I looked into the mirror and convinced myself that it would be difficult for him to resist my charms.

Impatiently I hastened to his quarters, and noiselessly

entered his bed-room. So uneasy had I become that I would know no rest til I had him in my arms. I switched on the electric light. The sudden light did not wake him up. He was fast asleep on an iron cot with his arms stretched both ways. In his sleeping posture, he looked a perfect specimen of Cupid at rest. I stood there motionless, gloating over his form and features. With stealthy steps, I approached his bed. I wanted to wake him up and bewitch him with my ethereal appearance. I stretched my hand to catch hold of his arm on my side, in order to awaken him. But suddenly my hand fell. I was shocked and startled. I was petrified on the spot. My eyes were riveted on his wrist. Was I dreaming? I rubbed my eyes and convinced myself that I was wide awake. Positively there was that 'X' mark which my mother had nailed on the wrist of my son before handing over to Anathashrama. So the cupid before whom I had come to dance was my own son! It was that missing son for whom I had longed, yearned, hankered, wept and swooned. My body began to quake with a mother's ecstatic feelings at this discovery of the long-lost son. My heart yearned to reclaim him as my son. Should I wake him up as a mother would wake up her own son? What would he think of me, at this dead of night, visiting his bed-room? Would he not take me to be a prostitute-mother? How could he believe that I am his mother at all

in my present prostitute-like appearance? Again a dark cloud of worldly thoughts and mundane reflections began to assail my mind. Should my husband know that I am his mother? Should Kamalaba know that I am his mother? Should the palace people know that I am his mother? And what a mother! A mother who had sold away her precious chastity for lust and lucre! A guilty mother standing shamelessly before her innocent son! A vicious mother aspiring to reclaim her virtuous son! The height of audacity! Again, should Huzur know that he is his father?

Inextricable complications stared me in the face and staggered me. My thoughts were engulfed in a vortex of worldly tornadoes which cried out silence and secrecy. I switched off the light and ran to my house. There I dropped on my bed like a stone, weeping and sobbing. Though the lost paradise of a son was regained, all the same, I could not receive and hold his head to my breast to comfort and solace him in his unhappy moments. The thought cut my heart to pieces. I was a son-less mother though the son was there before my eyes. He was a motherless son though the mother was there before his eyes. Natural maternal urge must be stifled and give place to an ordinary formality. Motherly rapture must be suspended and give place to a formal smile. The natural love of the blood must be

killed and cremated and give place to an ordinary fondness of an elderly woman. It was too much for me to bear and I fell in a swoon.

That time, in Kamalaba's bed-room I fell in a swoon, because I had lost my son. This time, I swooned in my bed-room, because I had regained my son. Oh! The irony of fate!

CHAPTER XIX

Maternal Instinct at Work

Next morning, I saw my son Roshan, sitting on the steps of his verandah with a tooth-brush. I hastened and filling a silver tumbler with the hot spiced milk, approached my son with it.

‘ Please take this, ’ I said to him tremulously.

‘ What’s it ? ’

‘ Your morning milk. ’

‘ Who sent it ? I suppose it’s Vijaya Kumariba Saheb. ’

‘ No. That’s not so. I have prepared it myself for you. ’

‘ But why should *you* take this trouble ? I don’t know you. ’

‘ It’s no trouble. Please take it. ’

‘ What’s your name ? ’

‘ Ganga. ’

‘ What are you here ? ’

- 'I am a chamber-maid to Kamalaba saheb.'
- 'Then you must have brought this milk under her orders. Isn't it so ?'
- 'No. I have brought it of my own will.'
- 'Stealthily from her ?'
- 'No. I have brought it from my own kitchen.'
- 'Where is your house ?'
- 'There ! Just opposite,' I pointed out.
- 'I see. But I can't understand why should you take trouble for me.'
- 'Because I know that you have no cook.'
- 'I see. But then I won't accept your milk unless you take your charge for it.'
- 'Please, for God's sake, take it ! I don't want any money from you.'
- 'But why ? You have put in costly spices in the milk. Do you get these things free of charge ? Surely, it must have cost you something.'
- 'Don't bother about the cost. You must take this milk if you want to please me. Do you mean to offend me by not taking it ?'
- 'Excuse me. I never meant to offend you. On the contrary, I am much obliged, but it is not my habit to take anything from anybody, free of charge.'

‘You pay me whatever you like, afterwards. But you must take this milk in my presence and whilst I am here.’

‘Tha’t alright then.’

He drank it off and put a four-anna piece in the empty tumbler.

I returned and asked Nathu to bring some requisites from the bazaar. I gave him a ten-rupee note. Impatiently finishing my duties at the palace I hastened to my kitchen. I was to serve my first dinner to my son. I prepared various delicious dishes. At noon I saw my son repairing from the palace to his quarters. I arranged all dishes tastefully in a large german-silver tray.

‘What is all this bustle for?’ Nathu asked me.

‘I have to offer oblations at the Lord Krishna’s temple, because we are not getting any progeny. I am taking this tray to the music-teacher. The poor fellow has no mother. Who will give him such nice things to eat?’

I wiped out my wet eyes and covering the tray with a napkin, took it on my head and went to my son’s room. He was seated on his cot. I placed the tray on a tripoy and lifting the tripoy to his cot said,

‘I have brought this for your dinner.’

‘But why all this fuss?’ He said, looking at the tray. ‘I don’t understand it. I have already cooked my food before I went to the palace.’

‘To-day is the birth-day of my husband.’

‘What’s he here?’

‘He is a head-attendant to Huzursaheb. Now come on, begin to eat. You must be hungry by this time. It is getting late. You should partake of the celebration, shouldn’t you?’

‘Gangabai! You are very kind to me. How can I refuse participation in the celebration of your dear husband’s birth-day? It’s my duty, now that I have come to know you. Indeed you must be loving your husband very much. I can see that from all these preparations. I thank you so much for considering me worthy of the participation.’

He commenced eating and my heart was filled with joyful contentment at seeing him taking food cooked by my own hands, twenty years after I gave birth to him. I stood beside him, fanning him and watching him to mark if he ate with relish my preparations.

‘How do you like these preparations?’ I asked him.

‘It seems, Gangabai, you are a very fine cook. Not only I like them but I enjoy them,’ he said with an air of stisfaction.

‘Then from now on, you need not cook your food. I shall do it for you in my kitchen and bring the tray for you, morning and evening.’

‘That would be convenient to me, Gangabai, provided you take the remuneration from me.’

‘You may pay me whatever you like but you should not cook. It’s not a man’s business.’

‘I shall pay you Rs. 30 per month Will that satisfy you?’

‘No. It’s too much. I will take only half the amount. Provisions here are not so costly as they are in Bombay.’

‘Provisions alone would cost you rupees fifteen, if not more. Then what about your cooking labour? I don’t want you to cook for me, free of charge. You must accept Rs. 30. Otherwise I can cook at my place.’

‘Well. Don’t bother me about the payment. For your satisfaction, I shall accept whatever you choose to give. But you should not cook. That’s fixed.’

‘That’s alright then.’

At nightfall, I took the dinner tray to him. I was anxious to see that he should take only that food which was cooked by myself. I wanted to make up for the loss of solid 20 years I had wasted without

him. While he was eating his supper, I prepared his bed. I found that water in the pot was not fresh and filtered. So I changed it.

‘Gangabai!’ He exclaimed, ‘you are not my maid-servant! You are only a cook. Why do you take all this trouble?’

‘You can’t drink such dirty water. The pot also is so unclean,’ I reprimanded him. ‘Do you want to spoil your health? I shall fetch water daily for you. You should never drink any water but what I fetch. The cold season is now setting in. You should no more take your bath with cold water. You might catch cold. Every morning, I shall prepare hot water in my kitchen and bring it for your bath. Don’t take your bath in the open. You might catch influenza. From tomorrow, I shall have to see to it that the rooms are kept clean. I shall sweep them twice daily. You needn’t engage a maid-servant at all.’

‘I shall pay you five rupees extra for that. I don’t want you to work for me free of charge. I hate it. Would I not pay five rupees to another maid-servant if I engaged her? In all, you will get Rs 35/- per month.’

‘Yes, but you should take care of your health first and not of my salary. I don’t want you to fall ill.’

Days passed without my knowing it, so busy I remained with the work. The health, convenience and comfort of my motherless son became the main mission of my life. The cheer and joy of it was so magical that I became more energetic and invigorated than ever before, and knew no fatigue. The sight of my son was sufficient to drive away all lethargy and fatigue from my limbs. I myself much improved in health and began to grow actually fat. The very idea that I was serving my long-lost son inspired me with a tremendous amount of zeal and enthusiasm in the work I was doing for him. As the winter was drawing nearer, I bought yarns of finely coloured wool and began to knit a woolen sweater.

CHAPTER XX

A Companion to the Princess

Next morning, I was washing some clothes of Kamalaba and Vijayaba in the bath-room. Huzur and Kamalaba were sitting on a sofa, conversing together. I looked at Huzur twice or thrice from the bath-room, but he did not ever look at me. I marked that his face was now as serene and grave as it was mischievous and frivolous before. I was wondering at the sudden change in his demeanour, when an attendant entered and said, ' Ji Huzur. The Head-mistress has come. '

' Send her up. '

Huzur rose and left the bed-room. I was curious to know why Seetabai had come. I went into the lobby, and saw her, preceded by the attendant and followed by Bhagirathi. I resumed washing, thinking what it was all about.

After a while, Huzur entered the bed-room followed by Vijayaba and Bhagirathi together.

‘This is Bhagirathi from the girls’ High-school,’ Huzur introduced her to Kamalaba. ‘The Head-mistress states, she is a very clever student. She is in the 6th standard and keeps first rank in her class. I was on the look-out for a companion to our Vijaya and asked the Head-mistress to find out one. She is recommending this Bhagirathi. I have decided to engage her at a monthly salary of Rs. 100 and all found. She will coach Vijaya in the English language and be a sort of companion to her. Vijaya is all alone in the palace. There is no girl of her age to give her company. So she will stay in the palace with her. Vijiya ! Go and lodge Bhagirathi in your own room and see that she is not inconvenienced in any respect. You shall treat her as if she is your own sister. Bhagirathi, you go with Vijaya, and if you need anything, tell her She will provide you with everything you need. Make yourself at home. I am sending for your kit from the Boarding-house.’

That this beautiful fresh bird of three days ago should be converted by Huzur into a companion to his daughter with such care was still an inexplicable mystery to me in spite of the plausible explanations of Hava. Confusion in my mind was rising with rapidity. I could not fathom the mystery in spite of my conjectures.

CHAPTER XXI

Unconscious Retorts

It was the beginning of the year 1937. The cold season in all its severity had already set in. As usual, when I took the tray to my son, I found him lying on his bed, covered with a sheet. He said to me,

‘Gangabai ! I don't want to eat anything today. Take the tray back. I have got fever.’ I laid my palm on his forehead. It was hot.

‘When did you get this fever ?’ I asked him. ‘You were quite alright in the morning.’

‘Soon after taking my bath, I felt indisposed and then, had this attack of fever. I couldn't go to Vijaya Kumari Basaheb for her lessons.’

‘Yes, I didn't find you there. All along I was worrying why you hadn't come.’

I then drenched my handkerchief with salt water and applied it to his burning forehead, but the fever went on increasing. I ran up to the palace and brought a thermometer and an ice-bag from Kamalaba. Measuring

the temperature, it was 104°. I sent Nathu to bring ice and sent word to Kamalababa to arrange for a doctor immediately. I was applying the ice-bag on his head when the chief doctor came, followed by Maharaj Kumar, Vijayaba and Bhagirathi. Then the temperature had risen to 105.4° and he was getting delirious. "Mother ! Oh my mother ! Where are you ? Why do you not show me your face ? Shall I die without seeing your face ?" My eyes became brimful of tears, and to hide them, I handed over the ice-bag to Vijayaba and went away to my quarters. There I bitterly wept.

For the first time in my life, I experienced the bitter fruits of my shameless misconduct. In sheer anger with myself, I beat my head against the wall and pulled my hair. Nothing could comfort me for the time being. The son craving for his mother and the mother hiding her face from him ! After a while, the indispensable need of my presence at his bed-side urged me to go there. I wiped out my tears and washed my face. I returned to the sick bed.

In the meanwhile, the doctor had left with Maharaj Kumar. Vijayaba was applying the ice-bag on his head. Bhagirathi was rubbing something on the soles of his feet. Vijayaba handed to me the prescription written out by the doctor, and said 'hurry up to the Dispensary, Gangabai, and bring the medicine. The

doctor says the doses are to be given every hour till the temperature comes down to 100°.'

After giving the first dose to my son, I took the ice-bag from Vijayaba's hand saying 'you need not take the trouble. I am doing it.' At about sun-set, Vijayaba and Bhāgirathi left. Before leaving, Vijayaba took me aside and said, 'look here, Gangabai ! I expect you to nurse Roshan until his fever is totally down. I hope fever will be down by tomorrow. If he gets delirious again, let me know at once. You need not come to the palace until his fever is down, and he totally recovers. I'll speak to Basaheb about it. I hear that you are cooking for him, but don't give him any solid thing to eat. The doctor has merely prescribed a liquid diet such as milk, tea, coffee, and juice of sweet lemons.' She then took out a ten-rupee note from her pocket and continued, 'You send for whatever you want for him from this. If you require more money, tell me.' Much against my will, I had to accept the note to keep up appearances so as to avoid any suspicion.

The fever continued for three days further. On the fourth morning, it lowered to 99.6°. I sponged his body with tepid water and changed his clothes. I brought the woolen sweater I had knitted for him.

'Now fever is down, but you might catch cold. Put this on, I have made it specially for you.'

‘ You are bothering yourself too much about me. I know that you have been vigilently watching me and you have not slept a wink for the last three nights. I know that you were all along shampooing my head and body, Gangabai! You are just like a mother to me. I wish I had a mother just like you. ’

‘ Regard me, then, as if I am your own mother. What more do you want ? What more could your own mother do, if she were here by your bed-side ? Do I not behave with you as if you are my own son ? ’ I stifled my tears. ‘ That’s true. But after all you are not my genuine mother. That makes all the difference. No nurse, however efficient and affectionate, can fill up the gap of a mother. That’s why I am hankering for my mother, the woman who conceived me, carried me and delivered me. I am yearning to see her face. I’ll tell you what it is. Please don’t tell anybody. It’s my secret. Promise me that you won’t divulge it to anybody whatsoever and I’ll tell you. It’s entirely between us. ’

‘ I promise. Tell me your secret. You can trust me, ’ I tremled and replied.

‘ I don’t know who my mother is. I don’t know who my father is. My position is worse than that

of a prostitute's son, because he doesn't know who his father is but at least he knows the mother. At least he has got a mother to care for and look after him. You see, I was found in the foundling-box of Nadiad Hindu Anathashram and since then I was brought up as an orphan. Now generally an orphan is one whose known parents are dead, but I was a special kind of orphan whose unknown parents were living. I don't care to know what kind of man my father was, and why he deserted me, or allowed me to be deserted. But I do care to know what kind of woman my mother was and why she deserted me. I was deserted when I was one month old. A father deserting his own children, I can understand. But a mother ! Oh ! It's beyond my understanding ! How do you explain it, Gangabai ! You are an experienced woman. '

I was dumbfounded. A tremour passed through my body and I began to shiver.

'What's it Gangabai ? What's the matter with you ? You are shivering. '

'That's nothing. I was startled when you said that you had been deserted by your mother when you were quite a tiny little infant. '

I made a vain effort to normalise myself.

'Yes, she did desert me. What a cruel woman she must have been to desert her own child ! Gangabai ! You are a woman. Could you ever be so cruel as to desert your own one ? Surely not. Never ! I can't even dream of it, a kind woman as you are ! Look ! how kind you are to me, though you are not my mother. You are kindness itself. I know you could never be so merciless as to expose a child of your own blood to the vagaries of fate. And all this is, simply because you are a soft-hearted woman. A soft heart is an inherent possession of a woman. I can't understand why my mother went against the inherent nature of her heart and became so cruel and atrocious. Take your example. That you are nursing a stranger or at least one who is not your son is, as I understand, due to your kind heart which is so natural to a woman. Then how do you explain the case of my mother, who, too, was a woman ? Why did she go against her own inherent nature ?'

'Women who are spinsters or widows,' I falteringly explained, 'often expose their children in that way in order to cover the shame of their begetting spurious ones.'

'But do they not know that going wrong with their paramours would in all probability result into conceiving children ? They know it and yet they

blindly plunge into the abyss of lust for the pleasure of their flesh and the gratification of their senses, without caring for the consequences. I am told some of them do it for money. That is still worse. I hate such shameless greedy women from the bottom of my heart. Prostitutes are far better than they. At least, they do not desert their children for fear of spurious production. Sometimes I get so much provoked that if I found a woman in the act of deserting her child, I would lash her with a whip. Heartless women! Putting the children of their own blood in the foundling-boxes of orphanages! I can't understand why a woman bold enough to go wrong with her paramour can't be bold enough to produce her child boldly before the world, so that there would be no necessity of maintaining foundling-boxes by orphanages. I can't understand how a woman can be brave in one respect and a coward in the other. Can you explain it, Gangabai! You are a woman. You know best '

' That's because she is anxious to preserve in outward appearances her own reputation and her paramour's, which would be lost if she were to produce her child boldly before the world. '

' Then the choice lies between the loss of the so-called reputation and the loss of the child and she

prefers the latter. But has she ever thought of the loss of the reputation that her thrown-away child would sustain? Has she ever cared about the stigma of illegitimacy that would permanently attach to her thrown-away child? It then comes to this. A mother saves her own reputation at the expense of her child's. All the same, personally speaking, I feel that a mother is after all a mother to her son. I heartily wish my mother had not deserted me. Or if she did, it was up to her to reclaim me. I would have forgiven all her weaknesses and faults. You see, the whole action of desertion by the mother makes it extremely difficult for the poor child, when it has grown up to mature understanding, to find out its own mother. The child is hankering after the mother, and it cannot know whether she is living or dead, and cannot find her, though living. That's the pity of it? I think the urge of the child towards its mother is greater than that of the mother towards her child.' I could not repress myself and ejaculated :

'No. You are mistaken. The urge of the mother is always greater. You don't know it, because you are not a woman.'

'Then why does not my mother reclaim me? How

do you explain it, Gangabai? Why does she not even attempt to find me out? It's past 20 years...'

'But who told you.....?' I made a mistake. 'How do you know that your mother has never attempted to find you out?'

'Then why has she not found me out if, as you say, her urge was great?'

My heart was choking with his unconscious retorts. The poor fellow did not know that he was talking to his own mother! I couldn't bear to listen to him any further. I wanted to stop his queries and unbearable demands for explanation.

'Your mother must have been dead long ago,' I curtly said.

'Yes, that's a possibility.'

With an excuse, I went home and cried to give vent to my pent-up emotions so inadvertently excited by my son's frank talk.

That evening, fever became normal. I was anxious to know why he had left Nadiad five or six years ago.

'Roshan! You did not tell me your complete story. Tell me how you fared at the orphanage.'

'Gangabai! Those people look after orphans very well. I was left in charge of a nurse named Rama-

bai, who brought me up until they sent me to the school. I used to see mothers of my friends at the school and I began to long for a mother. I got a longing to sit in her lap and play mischief with her. With my advancing years, the urge correspondingly increased instead of subsiding. One night, five or six years ago, I all along dreamt of my mother. In the dream, my mother was a very beautiful girl looking like a celestial fairy. She was dancing before a big-turbaned Nabob. The Nabob was so enamoured of her that he took out an emerald necklace from his neck and put it round that of my dancing mother. Thereupon she slavishly fell at his feet and uttered :

‘Ji Huzur ! I am but your slave ready to obey your commands.’ I exactly remember, to this day, these words uttered by the mother of my dream. I got wild with her for such slavishness and kicked her on the back. She looked at me and began to cry. Seeing her crying, I woke up. This dream made me very uneasy and threw me into an agitated condition of mind. Inauspicious thoughts began to assault me as regards the private conduct of my unknown mother. I made up my mind to search her and to save her from moral degradation if it was so, When I went to school the next day, I took with me fifty rupees which I had

collected in prizes. From the School I went straight to the station and caught the first train for Bombay. There I immediately advertised in prominent newspapers to the effect that a son left in the Nadiad Hindu Orphanage on the midnight of 26th. November 1916 wanted to see his mother. I gave the address, but alas! no mother came. Once, while I was entering the gates of a theatre, a gentleman called me. He was the proprietor of a Film Company and the theatre. He asked me if I would like to be a cinema actor, and if so, he would pay me Rs. 30 a month to start with. Miserable as I was feeling, I jumped at this proposal and joined the company. I served there for about 6 years and during this period gradually rose up to Rs. 200. One day, Huzursaheb called me and engaged me as the music teacher to Vijaya Kumari-basaheb on Rs. 300. The rest you know.'

I heard him to the last, and silently took my leave. Speech was impossible.

CHAPTER XXII

Loving Pairs

It was the Vasant Purnami holiday, the day of the god Cupid. In the morning, Kamalaba was in her worship-room engaged in her customary prayers. After washing the clothes, I was cleaning the bath-room with a broom, when, to my surprise I saw Maharaj Kumar dragging Bhagirathi by the hand and entering the bed-room. The seductive scene excited my curiosity. I at once closed the door of the bath-room, stood on the heap of the clothes, and peeped through the glass just above the door.

I saw that Maharajkumar catching hold of Bhagirathi made her sit on a sofa by his side.

‘Don’t feel shy, my dear!’ He laughed, and said to her, ‘I want to talk to you something in private. There is nobody here. Mother is in her

worship-room. That's why I have brought you here. I was always on the look-out for a suitable opportunity, and I have got it today. '

'What's it? What do you want to tell me in private? I am rather eager to know it, ' she smiled and said.

'I loved you at first sight, and since then I am blindly in love with you. Do you know that?'

A rosy glow flushed her cheeks.

'And since I saw you,' she replied, looking down and playing with the border of her saree, 'do you know what was the condition of my heart? I was every night dreaming of your sweet face in my sleep.'

He could not check himself and placing his arm round her dazzlingly white neck, kissed her on the cheek.

'You can't kiss me alone. Give me a kiss in return. Let us seal our love by mutual kisses.' She kissed him on the lips.

'Now what shall we do, my darling! now that I am loving you and you are dreaming me?' He asked her.

What do you suggest?'

'I suggest that you should marry me. What else? Isn't it a sweet thing to marry?'

‘Marriage is always sweet, my dear Vijay ! But when do you want me to marry you ?’

‘Are you so impatient ?’ He gently slapped her on the cheek

‘Which girl won’t be impatient to marry you, my dear ? I am so impatient that I would like to marry you today. Don’t you see that before marriage, we can’t behave, as we would like to behave ? When will you marry me ? I am so eager to be your wife.’

‘First of all, I shall have to obtain consent of my parents. I am sure mother won’t object. She once told me to choose my own mate. I don’t know the attitude of Bapu.’

‘Why should Huzursaheb object ? He loves me as if I were his own daughter. He is so regardful of my welfare. I think he will be right glad to see me wedded to you.’

‘Then let us both go to him. I will say that I want to marry this delicious girl.’ He again kissed her, but this time rather violently.

‘And I will say that I want to marry this mischievous boy.’ She pulled his cheek. ‘Father will say ‘yes.’ Then what next ?’

'Then we will request father and mother to fix up the marriage day.'

'No. No ! I will tell them we want to marry today. Today is the Vasant Purnami, the most auspicious day in the whole year for marriages. Why waste time ? I wonder at your patience.' She all of a sudden began to clap her hands, and laugh

'What's it ? Are you gone mad ? Why are you clapping and laughing ?'

'Oh ! I remember it now. That's very good. My darling ! You don't know it !' She again clapped and laughed.

'What's it ? Don't be stupid. Speak.'

'You see, Vijayaba loves Roshan just as I love you. Once she took me in her confidence and told me that she liked him so much that she would like to marry him.'

'Is that so ? And what about Roshan ? Does he love Vijaya ?'

'Who would not love such an angel as Vijayaba ?'

'Then you do one thing. Go and fetch Vijaya and Roshan here. They are in the sitting-room busy with their lessons. Then we all four go to Huzur to obtain his consent.'

‘That’s a lovely good plan, my dear!’

Bhagirathi got up from the sofa and ran up to the sitting-room, clapping her hands and dancing.

I got awfully nervous.

‘By God! Vijayaba wanting to marry my son Roshan! Children of the same father! Brother and sister! The idea!’

Bhagirathi dragging Vijayaba, entered the room followed by Roshan and ejaculated,

‘My dear Vijay! Here is the worthy couple. As worthy as you and I!’

‘Vijaya! Roshan!’ Vijay exclaimed, ‘Let us all four play the bridge. We shall discuss while playing the cards. Mother is still in the worship-room. She won’t come for an hour yet. Bhagirathi! Bring packs of cards and markers.’

Bhagirathi brought the requisite articles of play from her room.

Vijaya: ‘Who will be the partners?’

Bhagirathi: ‘Vijayaba! Don’t you worry! Of course, Roshan will be your partner. We know that he is going to be your life-partner, too. We are not fools to separate you from him even in the game.’

Vijaya:—'Shut up, Bhagirathi ! I know that by making us partners, you want indirectly to be a partner of my brother. I know your cunning.'

All the four hilariously laughed and commenced playing.

Vijay: 'Look here, Vijaya ! Roshan ! Bhagirathi and I will go to Huzur to seek his permission for our marriage. Isn't it so, Bhagirathi ? '

Bhagirathi : ' Of course. And we are taking with us Vijayaba and Roshan, too. Isn't it so, Vijayaba ?

Vijaya : ' Who told you that I wanted to marry Roshan ?

Bhagirathi : ' You did tell me the other day. Don't you try to fool me ! Don't pretend false modesty.

Vijaya : 'No. You are a liar. I only told you that I loved him. '

Bhagirathi : ' Then you want to love him without marrying him ? What an unholy maiden you are !'
All laughed again at the joke.

Vijay : ' Then, it's decided that we 'all four go to the father to receive his permission for our marriages as soon as he returns from his morning ride. '

Bhagirathi : ' Of course, we go. Roshan ! Why don't you speak ? You are quite mum and staring at Vijayaba. Don't you feel nervous ! Vijayaba is

not going to kill you, if you marry her.' All laughed again.

Roshan : ' All this is coming to me as a thunder-bolt. I can't believe it. It's all Vijayakumariba's fault. She never.....'

Vijaya : ' Roshan ! I am no longer Kumarisaheb or Basaheb or Kumaribasaheb. I am simply Vijaya to you. Ba means mother and Kumari means princess and I am neither to you, now that I am going to be your wife. No husband would call his would-be wife, Basaheb and Kumarisaheb. Now tell me, what's my fault ? '

Roshan : ' You never told me that you loved me. '

Vijaya : ' Roshan ! I expected you to tell me first that you loved me. I was all along waiting for it. It's always a man who proposes first. Did you ever hear a woman proposing first ? '

Roshan : ' Yes, you are right. But I felt too small to express my sentiments of love to a princess. How could I be so bold ? It would have been a gross audacity on my part, a paid servant as I am. '

Vijaya : ' No. You are a liar. You did express your sentiments of love, indirectly though, while you played on the harmonium and sang your love-songs,

as if I was your beloved and they were addressed to me as such.'

Bhagirathi : 'Roshan ! You are non-plussed. Now keep mum. You have been caught by Vijayaba red-handed. '

Kamalaba entered and all suddenly stopped their laughter and hilarity. They jumped up, and bowed to her.

Kamalaba : 'What are you all doing here ?'

Vijay : 'We were playing bridge and deciding marriages.'

Kamalaba : 'What marriages? Is it a cards' game ?'

Vijay : 'No mother. It's not a cards' game. Marriages in a game topple down like a house of cards. We were deciding actual human marriages.'

Kamalaba : 'What kind of human marriages ?'

Vijaya : 'Mother ! I have decided to marry this young woman Bhagirathi.'

Vijaya : 'And mother ! I have decided to marry this young man Roshan.'

Kamalaba : 'And what have you decided, Bhagirathi ?'

Bhagirathi : 'I love your son.'

Kamalaba : ' And you, Roshan ? '

Roshan : ' I love your daughter. '

Kamalaba was overjoyed and lifted her hands in fervent prayers and vehemently exclaimed, ' Oh Krishna ! My Lord ! How happy I feel today. You have rewarded my devotion to you. Oh ! Krishna ! My heart rejoices at beholding these beautiful young couples and I humbly pray to you to rejoice their happy hearts for ever, and grant them long life and prosperity. '

After receiving Kamalaba's benediction, the happy pairs left the bed-room. I descended down the heap of clothes and emerged from the bath-room almost breathless with a silver jug of water. It was the daily habit of Kamalaba to drink water soon after her worship was over.

Kamalaba : ' Ganga ! my heart rebounds with untold joy today. It was my constant worry to see Vijaya happily married. I am right glad to see that she loves such a nice and handsome young man as Roshan. What a refined and good-natured fellow he is ! When he marries my daughter, I will keep him like a prince. And as for Vijay too, I am glad to find that he loves such a fine fairy as Bhagirathi. What a civil and modest girl she

is ! When she marries my son, I will keep her as a princess.'

While kamalaba was all hapiness, my heart was sinking down.

'Man proposes but God disposes,' I inaudibly murmured.

CHAPTER XXIII

Sins of Father Visited upon Children

Without losing a moment, I hurried up to the other wing of the palace to meet Huzur. It was absolutely essential that I should acquaint him with all facts with regard to my son Roshan. It was high time that I should do so before the arrival of the two pairs. Huzur had not yet returned from his ride. Restless and agitated, I paced about in the lobby, impatiently awaiting his arrival. The marriage of children of the same father ! Would Huzur allow such an incestuous marriage ? I was in a stormy suspense. My conscience cried out a flat ' No. '

Huzur arrived, and saw me.

' Well Ganga, How is't that you are here ? ',

' I have come to tell you something in private, '
I whispered, ' about a matter of the utmost importance. '

He entered into the drawing-room. I followed him there. He ordered his attendant not to let anybody come in without permission. He sat on a cushioned chair and I sat on the floor-carpet just near him.

'Vijayaba wants to marry her music-teacher, and Maharajkumar wants to marry Vijayaba's companion. They are all coming to you for imploring your permission,' I nervously informed him.

He got startled and said, 'I don't mind Vijaya marrying her music-teacher but I do object to Vijay marrying Vijaya's companion.'

'You don't mind Vijayaba marrying Roshan, but I do mind it.'

'Why?' There was a look of fright in his eyes.

'Because Roshan is our son,' I trembled.

'How is he our son?' He stammered.

'If you remember, you sent me with Sidik rupees one thousand, about 20 years ago, in order to get rid of him to save your own reputation. My mother took me to Nadiad and I delivered him there. Before placing him in the foundling-box of the orphanage there, my mother nailed a cross-mark on his right wrist, in order

not to lose connection with him. The identification mark is still there on his wrist. Roshan admitted that he was bred and brought up in Nadiad orphanage. Besides, I have received a letter from the orphanage and that confirms his admission. Roshan is *our* son. '

'Then Vijaya, too, cannot marry Roshan. Oh God ! What sins I have committed !' He despaired and repented.

'Why do you object to Maharajkumar marrying Bhagirathi ?' I nervously enquired.

'Because Bhagirathi is my daughter. '

It was my turn to be astonished.

'By whom ?'

'I don't know. So many girls were visiting me 16 years ago. I can't say. '

'Then how did you come to know that she was your daughter ?' .

'You remember the Dashera night when Seetabai brought her to me. By God's Grace, I was saved from tainting her virtue by a mere accident. Oh ! What a dreadful sin I would have committed but for that God-sent accident ! Imagine a father lustily embracing his own daughter -of his own blood ! Oh ! What a horror ?'

He pulled his hair and began to cry like a child.

'Be calm, Huzur ! Take heart. You have done nothing wrong. After all you have saved her virtue. Thank God.' I tried to solace him. 'Yes, I did save her virtue but think what an abomination it is to hold one's own daughter into a lustful embrace ! Never ! Never shall I touch a woman any more. I don't want to take any risk. What a punishment to the blindly debaucherous father ! What a horror to seek fresh birds daily ! At length the inscrutable ordainment of Providence saved me from falling into that abyss of enormity which only a most unscrupulously atrocious father could commit. Yes. It saved me through that copper-holder.'

'What ! A copper-holder ?' I frightfully ejaculated.

'Tell me everything. I begin to suspect it.'

'Yes. God saved me through that copper-holder. That copper-holder proved to be my saviour.'

'But how ? Please tell me everything.'

'A sudden curiosity sprang within me to know what that charm contained. I opened the lid and found an inscription. It identified me as her father.'

'Where is the holder ?'

He opened a drawer of his table and took it out. It was the same I had put round my sister Jumna's infant, while carrying her to the railway station, some 16 years ago. I read my own handwriting on the small square piece of white paper.

‘Then Bhagirathi is my late younger sister Jumna's daughter,’ I faintly murmured to him.

‘But how?’ He started and shuddered. ‘You never informed me that she had conceived.’

‘I purposely avoided it, lest you might drive us out of Suvarnapur.’

‘Then how did you manage it?’

‘I got Jumna deliver her daughter privately in my own house.’

‘But she is coming from the Wadhwan Orphanage. Where did you leave her after she was born?’

‘On the same midnight she was born, I took her to the railway station and placed her basket in an open waggon of a goods train that was about to depart.’

‘Was the goods going to Wadhwan Junction?’

‘I don't know.’

'But it appears that goods train went to Wadhwan Junction. That night Seetabai told me that Bhagirathi had been sent to the Boarding-house along with two other orphan-girls by the Wadhwan Hindu Orphanage. So I immediately wrote to the Superintendent to know of her antecedents and he informed me that the girl was found by a pointsman of the Junction in an open waggon when it was being shunted out of the goods, and that she was sent to the orphanage by the station Master.'

'But why did you keep her at the palace? All this confusion is partly due to that.'

'After knowing that she is a child of my blood, could I remain indifferent to her? Am I so heartless a father? It was a paternal urge. I love her more than Vijaya because she has no mother.'

'What do you propose to do now?

'Well! I am awfully staggered by these complications and perplexities arising all of a sudden. I am in a dilemma. My brain is fogged. Let me think it out clearly. Now the position is that my legitimate daughter desires to marry my illegitimate son and my legitimate son desires to marry my illegitimate daughter. Am I correct? Yes. So all the children of the same father want to marry *inter se*. 'Oh! God! Save me from

committing further sins How can I permit marriages between brothers and sisters, legitimate or illegitimate ? That would be atrocious incest, Huzur raved.

The attendant entered.

‘ Ji Huzur ! Maharaj kumar, Vijayaba saheb, music-teacher and English-teacher seek your permission to come in. ’

‘ Send them. ’ Huzur hung down his head, when they entered.

The faces of the visitors were all beaming with joy. Smiles played on their pleasant faces. They respectfully bowed to Huzur and stood in a row at a distance from him.

Vijay : ‘ My dear father ! I have come to obtain your consent to my marriage with Bhagirathi. We love each other.

Vijaya : ‘ And I have come to obtain your consent for my marriage with Roshan. We, too, love each other. ’

Huzur, still keeping down his head, sombrely uttered in a hoarse voice,

‘ Vijay ! my dear son ! My heart is cut to pieces when circumstances over which I have no control

compel me to withhold my consent. You cannot marry Bhagirathi and Vijaya ! My dear daughter ! You, too, cannot marry Roshan.'

The apparent joy flew away from their faces. They all turned pale. They lost all strength. They sat down on the floor in sheer disappointment.

Vijaya : 'But father ! Mother has already blessed our marriages. She told us that you desired us to find out suitable mates for ourselves and that you believed in choice-marriages. We have found out our mates and you are withholding your consent. That's very bad. We are sorely disappointed.'

Tears trickled down from Huzur's eyes. He couldn't speak. The dead silence reigned in the room.

Vijay : 'Huzur ! I am your slave bound to obey your commands. But what makes you withhold your consent passes my comprehension. So far as I can see, there can be no reasonable objection to our marriages. Rest assured, father, that our hearts will break, if we cannot marry our chosen mates.'

Huzur's body was shaking. He gurgled through his throat :

'Vijay ! You cannot marry Bhagirathi, because she

is your sister and Vijaya ! You cannot marry Roshan, because he is your brother. '

Vijay vociferated ' How are we brothers and sisters ? That's very strange. '

' That's because the sins of a father are visited upon his children, ' with agony Huzur managed to say, and dropped down senseless on floor.

The four bewildered children looked at me in terror Their faces were pathetic.

Roshan : Gangabai ! You can explain it. You are a woman. How are we all brothers and sisters ? What sins has Huzursaheb committed ? '

Tears trickled down my eyes. A rumbling sound that precedes an earthquake emanated from my throat :

' Roshan ! prepare yourself to hear the bitterest truth. You are an illegitimate child. I am your mother. Huzur is your father. Vijayaba is your step-sister. '

Roshan and Vijayaba went into a fit and rolled down senseless on the floor.

' And Bhagirathi ! You, too, are an illegitimate child. My late younger sister Jumna was your

mother. Huzur is your father. Maharajkumar is your step-brother.'

The pair staggered and was stunned.

What an irony! Love's work was undone. And I, a wicked woman, was standing there, like a criminal in the dock, shamelessly watching these victims in the drawing-room of the palace of Maharaja of Suvarnapur.

With a will that was strange even to me, I mastered the rising storm of fast-gathering emotions. I was calm and serene. Without a word, I made my way towards the door, and left them. The recent emotional crisis had been the turning-point in my life. I was to vanish for ever, I decided. But it was too late.

E N D

